

**PREACHING ADVENT FOR PROPHETIC LIVING
IN A CONSUMER CULTURE**

A THESIS

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To the faithful men and women who had the courage to preach Christ in a prophetic way at Christmas and to faithfully call their congregations to give themselves away to the world for the sake of Christ's glory. May you continue to be emboldened in your preaching of Christ until He returns.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the problem that many preachers face during the advent season.

I will attempt to put forth a preaching event that will help people worship Jesus more, spend less at Christmas, give meaningful gifts, and love the least of these in the world.

The project will aim at inspiring faithful worship that has a social response to resisting the culture of consumerism and blessing others with the tangible love of Jesus.

CHAPTER 1

IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM

Remember when Christmas was a time of reflection on the birth of Jesus? When there wasn't the chaos of malls, shopping and spending; when the majority of our holiday time was spent on what matters most? Remember those days? Neither do I.

The Problem: Its Scope and Importance

In the west the Christian holiday of Christmas is threatened by the consumerism of our culture. Each year we come to this sacred holiday of the birth of Jesus Christ and find ourselves competing with holiday chaos that stems from consumerism. This is a problem that has a wide scope to it. Every Christian in the west who does not challenge that message of consumerism with the message of Christ's birth will find their understanding and experience of the birth of Christ stunted.

People are frustrated by this problem. In the midst of this season, between the story of Christmas and the mad rush to shop and spend, it is easy to lose sight of what matters most. The message of the advent of Christ can scarcely be heard over the ringing of cash registers at our local malls. God's people want to worship in a more meaningful way in the midst of Christmas.

This is such a large problem because if people cannot fully experience the power of the Advent story then their spiritual lives become threatened as they bow to the idols of money and materialism.

It is also a problem for families as they try to teach the value of the gift God gave us when He gave us His Son. It is difficult for children to grasp a connection between materialism and God's sacrifice. Most Christian families desire for their children to worship Jesus more than material things, but they don't understand how to model celebrating Christ at Christmas by giving wonderful gifts that stimulate worship.

This is also a significant issue for the church's witness in the world. It is impossible for the church to live prophetically in a consumer culture while simultaneously mimicking that culture's godlessness. The Old Testament is full of reminders that the followers of God will lose their way if they bow to the gods of the nations around them.

It is therefore imperative to our spiritual formation and the witness of the church that we reclaim the story of advent and learn to celebrate in a way that is consistent with the incarnation of Jesus. The church's voice is weakened when we speak of the Lord who came into the world with nothing yet we have hands full of material wealth, bank accounts depleted, and loads of debt.

Addressing the Problem

I propose to address this problem through preaching the Advent story and creating an Advent event with the purpose of helping congregations celebrate the birth of Christ in a way that is true to the story. The sermons and the Advent event entitled "*The Advent Conspiracy*" will help Imago Dei Community celebrate the Advent accurately and prophetically.

I will provide an outline of the four messages as well as a comprehensive overview of the Advent Conspiracy.

The Sermons

In preaching through the Advent story I will examine four major themes (*An Empire Threatened; A Relational Gift; Re-distribution; and Worship.*) These themes are revealed to us in the scriptures' birth stories of Jesus Christ. I will be looking at the results of the great act of God in giving us His Son.

An Empire Threatened

This theme will examine how a baby, who came in weakness and poverty and yet was in fact the King of kings, threatened Herod with all of his wealth and power.

A Relational Gift

This theme will look at the relationality of God in giving us His Son. God's answer for the world's problems was not material but rather spiritual and relational. God did not bring us more stuff; He gave Himself.

Re-distribution

This theme will examine how He who was rich became poor to make many rich. Here I will tackle the magnitude of what Christ sacrificed in coming into the world and giving up the glory of heaven so that we could benefit from all that He is and has.

Worship

This theme will reflect the true nature of the baby who was worshipped by the wealthy magi, the poorest shepherds, and the angels of heaven. On equal footing, they all witnessed the glory and majesty of Christ.

The Event

The Advent Conspiracy is an event designed to help our people live true to the story of Christ's birth. The four major components follow the four themes of the sermons.

An Empire Threatened

Here we will challenge our people to “resist the empire.” Though Americans are not under Herod's rule, we are living in a culture of consumerism much like that of biblical Babylon. We will encourage our people to “resist the empire” by drastically cutting their spending at Christmas time. In doing this we want to give them “permission” to focus on Jesus as the real meaning of the Christmas. We will also try and persuade them to not go into debt which leads to deeper bondage in the empire.

A Relational Gift

Here we will create do-it-yourself workshops and workbooks to help people discover the joy of giving less expensive but much more significant gifts that are relational in nature. God gave us His Son, likewise we need to give ourselves to one

another. There will be a website that will provide examples of these types of gifts to inspire the creativity of others.

Re-distribution

This is the place for us to practice redistributing our wealth just as Christ did. We will ask everyone to take the money they saved by resisting the empire and giving relationally and give it to the “least of these” around the world. We will take an offering right before Christmas. We will stipulate that this will be money left over from what they would have normally spent. Then we will give it away to the needy in our community and around the world. One-third of the money will be given to help solve the water crisis in the world by building wells.

Worship

Worship flows naturally out of the other three. We see the event as a primary way to stimulate worship in our congregation. Our goal is to teach people to reflect on the season instead of shopping, fighting the crowds and spending. Our hope is that while they are making gifts they will think about the gift of Christ; when they give relationally they will think about the relational God who gave us His Son; and when they re-distribute their wealth they will think of the God who did the same for them.

There is no better a time to practice our worship than Advent; the season in which Americans alone will spend 455 billion dollars. In short, our goal is that by design the whole project of sermons and the event will result in greater worship.

Evaluation

I will create a report of the project that presents the results, including a record of monies that were raised and the needs that they met.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advent is the time when Christ-followers worship Jesus as the Son of God, given to us by the Father for our salvation. The great theme of this moment is Worship. Therefore this chapter will focus on the theme of Worship and the different forms that Worship took in the Gospels.

In the first section I will examine literature that describes Worship of Jesus as God's gift to the world. If we are to recapture the full meaning of Christmas and preach to our people about that meaning, then we will need to understand magnitude of the advent of Christ.

In the second section I will examine literature that informs us of what Christ gave up in the incarnation. Christ, fully divine, fully embraced the limitations of being human. In order for us to worship Christ prophetically in our culture we need to understand what took place when God became a human baby.

In the third section I will be looking at literature on King Herod. In order to fully appreciate the intentional act of God in sending His Son into the world as He did, we must come to grips with the other "king of the Jews." It was this king who was threatened by the coming of Christ and for good reason. This will allow us to make appropriate application to our congregation equipping them to respond to the "Herodian" threats to our contemporary worship of Jesus.

All of this literature will help to establish my themes of worship for Advent. We worship God for his relational gift. We resist the empire because we worship another King. We willingly sacrifice for others as we worship Christ who

sacrificed much in his incarnation and ultimately his atoning death. When we truly understand the power of the Advent story we will be able to preach about Advent in a way that will inspire prophetic living in our people.

Worship Christ as God's Gift to the World

In Matthew's gospel we find the angelic announcement to Joseph.¹ Here Matthew sets the stage for the fulfillment of God's historical plan of salvation. Michael Green describes what the Gospel writer is doing:

Having prepared us through the genealogy for the appearance of the most important birth in all history, Matthew tells us in no uncertain terms who this baby is. He does so by unmistakable allusions to two Old Testament passages. The child is Immanuel and he is Jesus.

Immanuel means 'God is with us'. It is not a prayer. It is a statement. It takes us back to Isaiah 7:14: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.' That child of prophecy, that child who was to be a 'sign', has come at last. And he is no less than God with us. The Hebrews had such an exalted conception of God that they did not even make any image of him – something which so amazed their Roman conquerors that they dubbed them 'atheists', people without gods. Against this background Matthew claims, not that God has given us a representation of himself, but that he has come in person to share our situation.²

¹ Matthew 2:21.

² Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1988), 59.

On this great announcement R. T. Frank writes:

The name given in Isaiah is not of course the name “Jesus,” but far from being embarrassed by the problem of two different names, Matthew also draws the name “Immanuel” into his presentation of the theological significance of the coming of the Messiah by adding a literal translation of it as “God with us.” Probably Matthew expected his readers to reflect that the “salvation” which is the explicit meaning of the name “Jesus” in v. 21 was to be accomplished by the coming of God among his people, but he has not made any such linking of the meanings of the two names explicit.³

Craig S. Keener also writes with great insight on the salvific meaning of the name.

Isaiah probably referred to his own son “Swift Is the Plunder, Speedy Is the Loot,” who would perform exactly the same function as Immanuel (8:1-4). But because Isaiah’s children were for “signs” (8:18), it was reasonable for Matthew to see in Immanuel (cf. 8:8) a sign pointing to the ultimate presence of God and triumph for Judah in the Davidic Messiah who would be born to Israel (9:1-7; see, independently, Blomberg 1992a: 60; Keener 1993: 48), Matthew’s use of other texts in Isaiah 6-9 suggests that he may have in view the entire section from which he is citing (Ellis 1977: 201). Whatever Matthew’s exegesis, his primary point is clear enough: Scripture reveals the divine plan and those who trust its authority need not doubt the miracle of His promises.⁴

Not only does the meaning denote that God is bringing salvation but also that this Child is, in fact, God. Keener explains:

More than anything Matthew’s narrative of the virgin birth, like every other event in Matthew, explains and exalts the character of the Lord he regularly worships. If Matthew finds implicit truth about Jesus throughout Israel’s Bible, he expects his audience even more fully to hear what his own narratives declare about Jesus explicitly. In view of Matthew 18:20 and 28:20, Matthew clearly understands “God with us” in Isaiah 7:14 to mean that Jesus is truly God (Mt 1:23; Ridderbos 1974: 102). But as God “with us,” Jesus is also the fully human one who “saves his people” by the cross. Matthew thus invites his audience to consider and worship the God who accepts the ultimate vulnerability, born as an infant to

³ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 49.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 87.

humiliated and probably relatively poor parents into a world hostile to his presence (cf. 2:1-16).⁵

Matthew does not stop simply with one name but goes even further to give us God's specific intention for Jesus' life and ministry and therefore our focus of worship.

As Green points out:

The other great name accorded to the child of promise here is Jesus. That word, too, has a meaning: 'Yahweh saves.' 'God to the rescue,' if you like. To be sure, it was a common name. It goes back to the frequent rescue of his people by God in the Old Testament days, perhaps most notably through a man who bore the same name, Joshua. But it is clearly very significant for Matthew. As with Immanuel, he explains what it means: *Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*⁶

Salvation is at the center of the coming of Christ. His name foretells the intention of God for all people. France comments: "But whereas the Old Testament name spoke of God as the savior, Mary's son is himself to be the agent of salvation; here is scope for profound Christological reflection on the part of any of Matthew's readers who can see behind the common Greek name to its Hebrew origin."⁷

In the Gospel of Luke we find the angelic announcement coming to Mary regarding the title of the baby growing within her womb.⁸ On this title, Darrell L. Bock writes: The name *huios hypsistou* occupies an emphatic position because it precedes the verb. "Son of the Most High" is simply another way of saying "Son of God" since (*it is*) another way to refer to God's supreme authority as "the Most High."⁹

⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁶ Green, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 60.

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 53.

⁸ Luke 1:32.

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 113.

Mary's Worship

The entire event, from the announcement by the angels to the confirmation of their message when Mary encounters Elizabeth, inspired Mary to worship.¹⁰ We see her response as the humble servant of the Lord as she sings her song to God. The song gives an insight into the heart of Mary. She sees God as One who sees the humble and cares to deliver them. Once again Bock writes:

The reversal of social position will occur in the final exercise of God's power. Who is described? (*tapeinous*, humble) stands in contrast to (*dynastas*), a term that refers to rulers (Gen. 50:4). That rulers are removed from their thrones (*apothronon*) makes the nuance of (*tapeinous*, humble) clear. The powerful are governing rulers. The humble are those oppressed by these rulers. Mary has in mind God's covenant people, which is evident from 1:54-55 and the mention of God-fearers in 1:50. R. Brown (1977: 363) sees a reference to the spiritually oppressed, a reference that is correct in light of the emphasis on God-fearers in the hymn. All the injustice of the ruling classes against God's people will be reversed as the humble are lifted up by God. The rulers' oppression and lack of compassion will be dealt with by God, who desires that people treat their neighbor with compassion.¹¹

Here we see that the worship that inspired Mary was the dynamic act of God in bringing justice to the world through Jesus. Mary found herself in the center of God's saving plan and it was a plan that included freedom for the oppressed. Mary looked forward to this great act of God with a worshipful heart.

Shepherd's Worship

When God acts in salvation the response of those who benefit is worship. It is not Mary alone who worships Jesus as God's gift of salvation. There are shepherds who

¹⁰ Luke 1:46-56.

¹¹ Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 156.

have the fortunate experience of the angels' announcements of the birth of Christ. On the angelic declaration, Bock says:

The combination of titles present here is unique. *Savior*, *Christ*, and *Lord* do not appear together in any other NT text. The reader is prepared for the use of Savior and Christ here by previous Lucan discussion (pointedly in 1:31-35; conceptually in 1:67-79). But the title Lord applied to *Jesus* appears for the first time as a comprehensive title.¹²

The significance of this should not be overlooked in that the more profound of the many titles in the birth narratives is delivered not to kings and rulers but to the shepherds.

Leon Morris gives insight into the social class of the shepherds.

As a class shepherds had a bad reputation. The nature of their calling kept them from observing the ceremonial law which meant so much to religious people. More regrettable was their unfortunate habit of confusing 'mine' with 'thine' as they moved about the country. They were considered unreliable and not allowed to give testimony in the law-courts. There is no reason for thinking that Luke's shepherds were other than devout men, else why should God have given them such a privilege? But they did come from a despised class.¹³

Yet these shepherds, though socially despised, were of great value to God. God knows who will respond to him and these despised shepherds responded with action.

Bock wrote, "Angelic praise serves the same function literarily for Luke, as do choruses in Greek dramas (Schneider 1977a: 67) – they supply commentary. Thus, angels reveal to the shepherds through praise what the result of Jesus' coming should mean. Heaven addresses earth about Jesus' significance."¹⁴

Eduard Schweizer says;

The end and goal of the whole story is the praise of God, which now resounds upon earth, this time not from the tongues of angels but from the tongues of very human shepherds. Those who utter this praise do not constitute a new messianic

¹² Ibid., 216.

¹³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 84-85.

¹⁴ Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 219-220.

group. Like most readers, they go once more about their work, but their praise is joined with that of the angels.¹⁵

The response of the shepherds is to quickly go and find the child.¹⁶ On this Bock comments, “In looking at the totality of their response, Danker (Danker 1988: 60) points to the lesson of the narrative: ‘Depth of spiritual commitment is determined by the quality of one’s fidelity after the majestic voice is no longer heard.’”¹⁷

Magi’s Worship

The worship theme continues in the infant stories of scripture. In Matthew we find the visit of the Magi is for the sole purpose of worshipping the newborn King.

Michael Green writes:

Impressed by what they saw in the skies at night, some of these men journeyed west to Judea to find out what it meant. Is it not perfectly astonishing that men with so little to go on should venture so far, endure such hardships in travel, and face such uncertainties of finding the one the star betokened? What is more, they wanted to give him costly gifts and the worship of their hearts. They even recognized him as *king of the Jews*, a title that contrasts strikingly with Herod’s position, and which does not recur in Matthew’s Gospel until Jesus’ crucifixion. Herod held jealously to his kingship by might of arms and by bitter repressive measures. Jesus showed his kingship by self-sacrifice for others. At Calvary he demonstrated that the weakness of God that is more powerful than mere mortals, and the Magi seemed to have had some inkling of it.¹⁸

The insight of these Magi is not lost on the Gospel writer despite the fact that they were Gentiles. This is part of Matthew’s agenda showing us that Jesus is to be worshipped by all people as the Son of God. France comments:

¹⁵ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good New According to Luke*, Translated by David E. Green, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 52.

¹⁶ Luke 2:15.

¹⁷ Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 222.

¹⁸ Green, *The Message of Matthew*, 66.

Whatever the social and religious unsuitability of Magi, the fact that they were not Jews fitted more congenially with Matthew's universalist agenda. To have the "King of the Jews" recognized and honored first not by his own people but by representatives of the "many" who were later to come from the east and the west to take their place in the kingdom of heaven (8:11) appropriately set the scene for the ministry of the Israelite Messiah who would both be rejected by his own people (here foreshadowed by the stance of Herod and "all Jerusalem"; see v.3) and send out his disciples to recruit from all nations (28:19).¹⁹

Here also, we find that the Messiah is not only to be worshipped by every ethnic class but He is to be worshipped by every social class as well. The Magi were people of great means unlike the shepherds. Once again France comments:

We do not know what social position these Magi held, but it was sufficient for them to have felt it appropriate to go to visit a newborn king, and to have been given an audience with the king in Jerusalem. For these foreign dignitaries to prostrate themselves in homage before a child in an ordinary house in Bethlehem is a remarkable illustration of the reversal of the world's values which will become such a prominent feature of the Messiah's proclamation of the kingdom of heaven (18:1-5; 20:25-28, etc.). Their gifts are those of the affluent: gold, then as now the symbol of ultimate value, and exotic spices, which would not normally come within the budget of an ordinary Jewish family. Frankincense (which came from Southern Arabia and Somalia) was an expensive perfume, and was burned not only in worship but at important social occasions; for its nonreligious use (with myrrh) see Song 2:6; 4:6, 14; cf. Sir 24:15.²⁰

France also sees the gifts of the Magi as pointing to a larger narrative within Matthew regarding the child's life and ministry.

Despite the symbolism traditionally discerned in the gifts of the Magi since the time of Irenaeus (gold for royalty, frankincense for divinity, and myrrh for death and burial – the latter based on John 19:39), myrrh, too, was primarily used as a luxurious cosmetic fragrance (Esther 2:12; Ps. 45:8; Prov. 7:17; Song 1:13; 5:1, 5). These are luxury gifts, fit for a king. The reader who knows the Old Testament stories cannot fail to be reminded of the visit of the Queen of Sheba with her gifts of "gold and a great quantity of spices," to the son of David in Jerusalem (I Kings 10:1-10), and of the imagery which that visit provided for subsequent depictions of the homage of the nations to the Jewish Messiah (Psalm 72:10-11, 15; Isaiah 60:5-6).²¹

¹⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 67.

²⁰ Ibid., 75-76.

²¹ Ibid.

Simeon's Worship

Luke continues to create a picture of worship for us with two characters in his Gospel, Simeon and Anna. They are both devout pictures of worshippers. Simeon gives us an important picture as we consider what our response to Jesus should be. Bock states:

In church tradition, Simeon received the name Theodochos (God receiver) for his role in this event (R. Brown 1977: 439; Plummer 1896: 67). What follows is a hymn of prophetic praise to God for the joy of seeing the Messiah in fulfillment of God's word. Simeon's reception of Jesus is intended to picture the arrival of messianic hope for Israel. The prophet represents the nation and, beyond that, all humanity.²²

Once again we see the common response in the infancy narratives of singing a hymn of praise to God for His gift of salvation in Jesus, as Simeon sings his song of praise. The hymn is one of theological importance.

The hymn as a whole repeats basic themes of all the hymns in the infancy narrative. God is acting for his people Israel. He is saving them according to his plan and promise. That salvation is found in Jesus. But the *Nunc Dimittis* also adds to these themes. Jesus is now directly associated for the first time with the "Servant" hope of Isaiah 40-66.²³

Morris comments:

As with the hymns in chapter 1 this little song is known by its opening words in the Latin, namely *Nunc Dimittis*. Simeon's now is important. He is ready to die peacefully now that he has seen God's *salvation*, *i.e.* the Baby through whom God would in time bring salvation. His language is that used of the freeing of a slave and he may be thinking of death as 'his release from a long task' (Plummer). Simeon goes on to show that this salvation is not for any one nation but for all. This is clear enough in *all peoples*, but Simeon spells it out by speaking of both the *Gentiles* and *thy people Israel*. It is probably the only poetic structure that links a *light for revelation* with the former and *glory* with the latter, for he would bring revelation to Israel as to others. But there is appropriateness in linking glory with Israel. There is much about glory in the Old Testament, particularly in

²² Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 241.

²³ *Ibid.*, 245.

connection with God's manifestations of Himself to His people. But Israel will see glory in its truest and fullest sense when it sees the Son of God; His being a light to Gentiles means no diminution of Israel's glory but rather its full realization.²⁴

This wonderful gift from God comes with a high cost. The salvation that God would bring through Christ would cause many to worship and many to reject God.

Foreseeing this, Simeon's worship turned prophetic as he spoke to Mary regarding her son. Bock writes:

The emphasis on opposition continues in the reference that Jesus will be a sign of contesting. *Antilegomenon*, that is opposed, has a future sense, (R. Brown 1977: 441; BAGD 73 §2; BAA 148 §2; BDF §339.2b). Humans will resist Jesus. For them, Jesus will not be a hope of promise fulfilled, but a figure that is to be opposed. The sign is characterized best as one of contention, not only rejection, because the point of the context is division (Rengstorff, TDNT 7:238-39). The incident in 4:28-29 illustrates this situation. Simeon knows that although Jesus is God's hope, not everyone will respond positively to him. The raising of this aspect of Jesus' fate is Luke's first indication that all will not go smoothly for God's Anointed.²⁵

This prophetic vision was one that would cause great pain for Mary and reveals to us that worship of Christ is at times very costly. Bruce Larson speaks to us about this:

Simeon prophesied suffering for Mary. To begin with, we learn how poor she and Joseph were because they have brought two turtle doves to sacrifice for the ritual of cleansing, whereas the usual sacrifice was a lamb. The mother of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world could not afford a lamb. And while she and Joseph were sacrificing their turtle doves, Simeon addressed her directly, warning her that a sword would pierce her soul. I wonder if she remembered at that moment the angel's greeting, "Blessed are you among women." She was to suffer poverty and pain and yet she was most blessed among women. Poverty is a relative thing. Mary and Joseph had nothing, but they had everything. They had great joy along with pain and sorrow, and this is what life is for most of us. The angel spoke only of joy, but life for all of us is bittersweet. Mary was to have a great deal of pain, just as Simeon predicted.²⁶

²⁴ Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, 88.

²⁵ Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 247.

²⁶ Bruce Larson, *The Communicators Commentary: Luke*, (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 58.

On the cost to Mary, Morris comments:

Simeon goes on to the cost to Mary. The sword (*rhomphaia* denotes a large sword, not the small *machaira* of 22:36; 38, 49, 52) that *will pierce* Mary's soul is the death of Jesus. His suffering will not leave her untouched. Simeon's final words point to the revelatory function of Jesus' work. Men declare themselves by their attitude to Him. They cannot ultimately be neutral. When men see Christ suffer, their reaction shows on which side they stand.²⁷

The infant narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke give us a strong picture of the worthiness of Jesus. God gives Jesus to us for our salvation and the only response we should have is one of worship.

It is clear from the scripture that this is the message for the whole world regardless of wealth or status. The point of the story is that the entire world should praise God for giving us the gift of His Son, who is our Savior and King. The worship He deserves is costly at times, yet nothing in the world is of more value than Jesus. In order to preach Advent prophetically and call people to worship, the preacher must have a grasp of the biblical significance of Christ's birth.

Jesus and the Empire

In this section I will be examining Herod's response to Jesus. Herod, known through the centuries as Herod the Great, was the ruling King of Judea at the time of Jesus' birth. It would have been hard not be impressed with King Herod and his many accomplishments. I quote at length from Herod's own words about these accomplishments:

A copy is here set out of the achievements of King Herod and of his expenditures in restoring Judean pride and self-confidence. The original is engraved on bronze tablets at Caesarea Maritima, with copies in Jerusalem, Sebaste, and Panias.

²⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, 89.

1. At the age of twenty-five years I was appointed governor of Galilee; I raised an army at my own expense to suppress brigandage in the region and put down Hezekiah, who was oppressing the Galileans.
2. Three times I was appointed *epitropos* (procurator) of Syria, first by Sextus Caesar, then by Cassius Longinus, and finally by Caesar Augustus. I brought peace to southern Syria and assisted in its financial management.
3. I served Hyrcanus, the last of the Hasmonean kings, faithfully with forces that I raised and paid for myself, and I fought vigorously against his brother Antigonus, who tried to usurp his throne. When Antigonus allied himself with Parthia, Rome's enemy, I fought their forces though my army was badly outnumbered. I also fought the armies of Chalcis, Ituraea, and Nabatea in various campaigns, inflicting severe defeats on them.
4. During the Roman civil wars I ensured Judea's security through well-chosen alliances. After the great Caesar was assassinated and his murderers were brought to heaven's retribution, I was appointed tetrarch of Galilee and later king of Judea by the Senate in Rome.
5. I accompanied my troops in support of Setus Caesar at Apamea, Mark Antony at Samosata, and Caesar Augustus at Alexandria. My troops supported Aelius Gallus in Rome's campaign against the Sabaens in Arabia Felix. I built and equipped the first Judean navy at my own expense, and with it I accompanied Marcus Agrippa on his campaign against Pontus in the Black Sea and Sinope. I ensured peace in the East by keeping peace in Judea.
6. When I was elevated to the kingship, Judea was a small landlocked state. To the original territory of Judea, Galilee, and Peraea were added Samaritis and Western Idumaea. I successfully persuaded Augustus to return territory unlawfully given Cleopatra. Augustus added to my kingdom the coastal cities of Gaza, Azotus, Joppa, Strato's Tower, and Anthedon, together with Gadara and Hippos. Later, I was granted rule over Batanea, Trachonitis, and Auranitis to mark my pacification of the regions from brigands. Augustus added Hulitis and Panias to my territory, formerly comprising Ituraea. By these extensions the kingdom of Israel was increased during my reign to match that of the blessed King David and King Solomon, restoring our country to its former greatness.
7. I secured for the Jews in the Diapora the freedom to worship the God of Israel, to live where they wished, to follow the dietary laws, to send the Temple-tax to Jerusalem, not to serve in the army, and not to profane Sabbaths. Because of my friendship with Augustus and Marcus Agrippa decrees were passed in

numerous cities guaranteeing these rights and privileges. In gratitude, the Jewish community in Rome named synagogues after Augustus, Agrippa, and me.

8. With the agreement of the Lord's high priests and as a mark of my piety I rebuilt the Temple of the Lord of the Universe, blessed be he, in Jerusalem. I trained priests to do the work, gathered materials from the four corners of the world, and prepared stones and timbers ahead of time. Not a day of sacrifice was left unmarked, nor did a day of rain slow the workers on the divine project. The structure was paid for at my own expense.

9. Judea's economy was strengthened during my reign through friendlier contacts with other peoples, improved trade routes, and enlarged harbors; by massive public works

10. When earthquakes, famines, or plagues shook the nation, I provided supplies of grain, tax relief, and support for the elderly and the infirm.

11. I increased exports of dates, opobalsam, wine, olive oil, and asphalt, and encouraged the pottery, perfume, and glass industries.

12. In recognition of my assistance, Augustus granted me control over and half the revenues of the copper mines in Cyprus.

13. I improved social justice with new laws while encouraging support of Torah. I suppressed dissension among the people and even in my own family, and I put an end to revolutionaries who tyrannized the common people.

14. I was on the friendliest of terms with all true worshipers of the Lord, including members of our nation in the Diaspora. I did not encourage sectarianism, but worshipped the God of Israel in his Temple.

15. I shared my rule with others, first with Hyrcanus, then with my brothers Phasael, Joseph, and Pheroras, and with my brother-in-law Costobar. I married my children to others of equal status within and outside Judea. My sons were educated in Rome to equip them better to rule in Judea.

16. In Jerusalem, in addition to the Temple, I rebuilt walls and defensive towers for the security of the people, constructed palaces, public buildings, shops, theater, amphitheater, aqueducts, and cisterns.

17. Samaritis was reincorporated in Judea; I rebuilt Samaria, renaming it Sebaste to mark my friendship with Augustus, and provided it with walls, towers, stoas, agora, temples, aqueducts, a theater, and a stadium.

18. Likewise I built Caesarea Maritima, making its harbor the largest on the Inland Sea and using all the latest technology. It, too, has walls, towers, stoas, aqueducts, religious buildings, a palace, a theater, a stadium, and an amphitheater, all built by me in honor of my patron Augustus.
19. New cities were built on my instructions at Phasaelia, Antipatris, Agrippias, Pente Komai, Gaba, Bathyra, and Heshbon. I settled veterans on allotments of land which I paid for from my own resources.
20. In addition to the Temple in Jerusalem, may the Lord be praised, I showed my piety in a memorial to the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Hebron, another to Abraham at Mamreh, one to King David in Jerusalem, and in tombs for my own family. I built temples in Roma and Augustus in Caesarea, Sebaste, and Panias, reconstructed a temple in Rhodes, and helped complete a temple in Si'a.
21. I was made President of the Olympic Games for life to reward my contributions there. For the people of Damascus, Ptolemais, Sidon, Berytus, Tripolis, and Delos, I built facilities for games and festivals. I instituted games in Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Sebaste, where the competitors honored me with their prowess. Inscriptions and monuments honor my assistance in Athens, Chios, Cos, Samos, Pergamum, Phaselis, Cilicia, and Lycia.
22. I improved public facilities in Tyre, Byblus, Laodicea-on-sea, Balanea, Antioch, and Sparta. At Nicopolis, near where Augustus Caesar triumphed over Rome's enemies, I constructed most of the public buildings.
23. I secured the borders of Judea, built fortresses and walls where necessary, and established friendly relations with Judea's neighbors.
24. In recognition of my role I was appointed "protector" of Nabateans.
25. At my own expense I stimulated the economy, engaged in public works, offered tax and famine relief, and built religious and cultural buildings.
26. In Jerusalem, Caesarea, Sebaste, Herodium, Phaselis, Jericho, Sepphoris, and other cities I improved the water supply with aqueducts bringing purest spring water great distances, all at my own cost.²⁸

It is clear to see that Herod was a ruler of power, wealth and ability.

Despite this self assessment of Herod most saw him in a very different light. Samuel

²⁸ Peter Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 315-318.

Sandmel writes:

Herod was hated, and he was cruel. He was also maligned. Such was the case, for example, when there was attributed to him descent from an ancestor who was a male prostitute in a pagan temple of the Philistines at Ascalon. Such, too, is the case in the account of Josephus that just prior to his death, Herod assembled Jewish notables from all over the land, gathered them in the hippodrome at Jericho, and gave orders through Salome that at his death, his soldiers should slaughter all the important people assembled there, thereby to ensure that a period of mourning by the populace would follow his death.

Such, too, is the case in the passage in rabbinic literature which tells us that Mariamne preferred death to marrying Herod – as if the marriage did not take place! – and that after her death Herod preserved her body in honey for a period of seven years; the tale then diverges into two opinions, whether or not he committed necrophilia upon her.²⁹

So why was he threatened by the birth of Jesus as Matthew's Gospel tells us?³⁰

Matthew's Gospel established Jesus as the legitimate King of the Jews. Here Green writes:

Matthew included Jesus' genealogy partly for the reasons of validation we have just considered, but mainly because he wanted to draw attention to the links Jesus had both with David and with Abraham. Jesus is the fulfillment of all history, and in particular of God's promise to Abraham that in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed and of his promise to David that his throne and kingdom would be established for ever before the Lord.³¹

Green goes further to conclude that Matthew is establishing the fact that Jesus has legal right to the throne of David by using Joseph's genealogy.

This may help us to understand the divergence in the genealogies of Jesus according to Matthew and Luke after they reach the Babylonian captivity. The line of kings had ended, and there were many collateral lines which could trace ancestry back to David. The rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus, could trace his ancestry back to David through one of these lines. It seems probable that Matthew is giving us Joseph's story and lineage, and that Luke is giving us Mary's. Matthew certainly gives us Joseph's story (angelic annunciation, perplexity and obedience), and this fits in well with his genealogy, which is

²⁹ Samuel Sandmel, *Herod: Profile of a Tyrant*, (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1967), 261-262.

³⁰ Matthew 2:3.

³¹ Green, *The Message of Matthew*, 57.

clearly Joseph's. Luke, by contrast, tells us Mary's story (angelic annunciation, perplexity and obedience), which suggests that he may well be giving us her lineage as well. Thus Jesus would be legally 'the son of David' through Joseph, and biologically the descendant of David through Mary.³²

France also comments, "This royal note runs through the story as a whole.

Several strands of scriptural fulfillment are woven into the story, quite apart from the overt Davidic quotation in v. 6, all of them contributing to the reader's reflection on Jesus' specific role as "King of the Jews."³³

Therefore we can see that Herod must have believed the legitimacy of the child King when the Magi told him of the child who was to be born a King.³⁴ On this Keener writes:

Herod thus had every reason to believe the astrologers report (2:3). Believing it led to his dismay, for there was little room for two kings in his realm: though he was Idumean by birth (Jos. *War* 1.123; 1.313), he considered himself "king of the Jews." A comet signal of another ruler would thus necessarily indicate his own demise. Comets (like Halley's, ca. 12 B.C.) and analogous celestial signs usually signaled the death of one ruler and the consequent rise of another.³⁵

Herod not only saw the birth of this King as a threat but a direct challenge to his throne.

That the Magi seek one "born King of the Jews" may further underline the challenge to Herod, who was widely known to have achieved rule by warfare and politics, not by birth (Overman 1996:43). If Herod had actually permitted some to hail him as a deity (cf. OGIS 415) and, more likely, had rewarded prophets who appeared to validate his reign. Josephus (Jos. Ant. 14.373-79; Witherington 1990: 93) suggests that this validation was intended in a messianic sense or otherwise revealed messianic aspirations (Agourides 1992), one can understand just what sort of threat the Magi's announcement represented to him. That all Jerusalem was troubled with him (a strong term; cf. 14:26) may indicate the degree to which they felt threatened by the possibility of political instability more than they longed for a deliverer.³⁶

³² Ibid., 62.

³³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 61.

³⁴ Matthew 2:2.

³⁵ Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 101.

³⁶ Ibid., 102.

This would be a typical response for Herod. He was known to kill his own wife when he felt she posed a threat to his throne. Here Jerry Knoblet explains:

Alexandra, thinking that Herod might die in Samaria, took steps to seize the kingdom just in case. She did not want her grandsons, Alexander and Aristorbulus, to rule, for she believed that the Almighty had ordained that privilege for her. Using incredibly poor judgment, she approached the military officers of the two fortresses in Jerusalem (one being Baris, the fortress to be re-named Antonia) and the temple authorities about supporting her bid to be queen. Considering her self-nomination to be a bit brassy, they reported the incident to Herod's cousin, who then relayed the message to Herod. Unwise because she had approached men who were loyal to Herod, she had completely misgauged the matter. Herod was a mentally sick man but not that sick. Herod returned from his trip to Samaria, and her execution was swiftly carried out (Ant. 14.7.8: 247-251).³⁷

Herod also killed his own sons when they posed a threat to his throne.

Convinced that dissatisfaction was rife among the army, Herod knew that he needed to act quickly to stop it. The sons were transferred to the prison in Sebaste (Samaria) and executed by strangulation (Ant. 16.11.7: 394; BJ 1.27.6: 550-51). As the people mourned their loss, the sons were hastily buried in Alexandrium alongside Mariamne's father and many of her relatives. Caesar did not approve the way that Herod handled the situation in the least. The end result was not what he wanted.³⁸

Knoblet believed that Herod was fully capable of killing the young boys in

Bethlehem as told in Matthew 2:16-17. Knoblet said:

Would Herod be cruel enough as to murder all the male infants of Bethlehem? A careful analysis of Herod's mental illness bears out that he was mentally unstable. Matthew's account is consistent with Josephus' portrait of Herod. Herod was certainly capable of such barbarity. He murdered his innocent wife and executed three of his sons. Matthew's account is very believable in light of what Josephus tells us about Herod. Matthew's account should not be disregarded as a myth simply because Josephus leaves it out.

How many infants did Herod murder? The number varies. Some estimate the number to be very small, and some think it was rather large. One way to handle

87. ³⁷ Jerry Knoblet, *Herod the Great*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005),

³⁸ Ibid., 145.

Josephus' omission is to claim that the number killed was only a few, and that is why he did not record it. That position does not seem to do justice to the recorded facts. On the other hand, this writer would estimate the number to be in the hundreds. This writer is not surprised in least that Josephus did not include this account in his narrative, for he was manifestly biased in favor of Herod.³⁹

Here is a threatened king who goes to great lengths to protect his kingdom. He uses violence and military force to chase down the baby that was born "King of the Jews." The slaughter of the innocents is a stark picture that shows us how those who do not worship the baby may respond to Him. They may see Him as a threat to all that they hold dear.

The contrast between Jesus and Herod is plainly seen. Green comments:

The note of contrast is strongly emphasized in this short account. There is the contrast between Herod's kingship and that of Jesus: one inaugurated by Rome, an alien power, and based on aggression and cruelty; the other originating from love, shown in vulnerability and entering into its kingdom through the cross. Herod was thirty-three at his inauguration, and Jesus the same age when he died. What a contrast!

Matthew underlines particularly the contrasting responses to Jesus. We have seen how the Magi pursued what they knew to the utmost of their powers, and made an act of obeisance and dedication that takes our breath away. Those wise men sought him wholeheartedly (wise men and women still do) but Herod and the Jewish clergy stood against them. Herod's response was hatred and fear: hatred of anything and anyone that threatened his self-centeredness, and fear of a possible rival, however improbable. The lust for power blunted the better qualities in Herod's character. Power still has this corrupting tendency today. Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, Saddam's Iraq and Milosevic's Serbia show the length to which self-seeking can go against what is known to be right.⁴⁰

Jesus came as a King born in poverty and weakness, with a heavenly army declaring the good news to the lowliest of shepherds. The earthly king Herod paced throughout his palace of gold and was in a panic. It is important that we recognize, as we preach the story of Advent, that this is not a children's story. God came into the world

³⁹ Ibid., 164-165.

⁴⁰ Green, *The Message of Matthew*, 67.

threatening the powers that be. He still is. When we live faithfully to Jesus we should live resistant to the Herods of our day. We are to serve a different King. Preachers must communicate this dramatic part of the Advent story.

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ

We now turn to the incarnation. The relevance of the incarnation for Advent is seen in the virgin birth of Jesus. Millard J. Erickson writes:

The doctrine of the virgin birth is a reminder that our salvation is supernatural. Jesus, in telling Nicodemus about the necessity of new birth, said that “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:5b-6). John stated that those who believe and receive authority to become children of God are born “not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). The emphasis is that salvation does not come through man’s effort, nor is it his accomplishment.⁴¹

The paradox of God being also man is one that causes the believer to stand in humility before God, for it is all God’s work not ours that effected our salvation.

The virgin birth is, or at least should be, a check upon our natural human tendency toward pride. While Mary was the one who gave birth to the Savior, she would never have been able to do so, even with the aid of Joseph, if the Holy Spirit had not been present and at work. The virgin birth is evidence of the Holy Spirit’s activity. Paul wrote in another connection, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:7). The virgin birth is a reminder that our salvation, though it came through humanity, is totally of God.⁴²

The virgin birth gives us a picture of the uniqueness of Jesus and the Sovereign reign of God. Erickson comments:

⁴¹ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 757.

⁴² Ibid.

The virgin birth is evidence of the uniqueness of Jesus the Savior. Although there could have been an incarnation without a virgin birth, the miraculous nature of the birth (or at least the conception) serves to show that Jesus was, at the very least, a highly unusual man singled out by God in particular ways.

Here is another evidence of the power and sovereignty of God over nature. On several occasions (e.g., the births of Isaac, Samuel, and John the Baptist) God had provided a child when the mother was barren or past the age of childbearing. Surely these were miraculous births. Even more amazing, however, was this birth. God had pointed to his tremendous power when, in promising a child to Abraham and Sarah, he had asked rhetorically, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Gen. 18:14).⁴³

Stanley J. Grenz sees the virgin birth as central to the incarnation of Christ as well. Grenz writes:

At the heart of this basic Christology are several assertions. Jesus combines in one person a divine and a human nature. The incarnation, understood as a historical event (perhaps occurring through the virginal conception), was the means whereby the union of these two natures was affected. This act was the work of the Second Person of the Trinity, the *Logos*. This act resulted in a “hypostatic union” of deity and humanity in Jesus, that is, one in which the personal center of the earthly life was the eternal Son, with the human nature existing only through its union with the *Logos* (*enhypostasis*). Finally, the historical act of incarnation occurred in the womb of Mary.⁴⁴

Grenz affirms the doctrine of the virgin birth despite the modern debates as to its validity and necessity.

The state of the discussion to date suggests that we do well to accept the majority opinion of the church throughout its history. We affirm that the virgin birth was indeed a historical event.⁴⁵

Grenz also shows the virgin birth as relating to the incarnation of Christ as an affirmation of the fullness of Christ’s deity as well as the fullness of His humanity.

⁴³ Ibid., 757-758.

⁴⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 402.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 422.

The weakness of the connection between the virgin birth and other doctrines leads to an important theological conclusion. While being an important doctrine, the virgin birth is not christologically indispensable. Christology does not rise or fall with the historicity of the virgin birth in the way that it is dependent on Jesus' historical resurrection. The confession that Jesus was born of a virgin coheres well with the twin Christological affirmations that Jesus is fully divine and fully human.⁴⁶

Donald G. Bloesch writes of how the virgin birth affirms that human redemption is completely a work of God.

The stories of the virgin birth testify that in the work of human redemption God does not use the will of man or the will of the flesh (cf Jn 1:13). "God managed without male desire and that proud and complaisant power which subdues and possesses." (Wakefield, "The Virgin Mary in Methodism," p. 157) The virgin birth "may be a sign of God's independence of ordinary human processes, and of our proud masculinity."⁴⁷

In light of the incarnation Bloesch gives reasons for affirming the virgin birth.

In a time when the virgin birth of Christ is increasingly dismissed as a relic of a mythological past, it is important for those who defend this doctrine to give valid and compelling reasons for their belief. First it is unassailable that the virgin birth (and I am here speaking primarily of the virginal conception) safeguards and communicates the event and significance of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. The virgin birth is a powerful witness to the paradoxical reality of God in human flesh, a paradox that is not merely useful but indispensable in the affirmation of the historic faith.⁴⁸

The virgin birth forms part of the authentic New Testament witness. The stories of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke are both strikingly Jewish-Christian and Palestinian in form and content (Machen). They have always formed part of the textual tradition. Moreover, they are so different that it leads one to assume that they did not originate from the same source and therefore "must have belonged to the common tradition of the early Church."⁴⁹

Still another reason for affirming the virgin birth of Christ is that it constitutes an essential truth of the catholic tradition. The popular appeal of these stories in the apostolic church and in the church through the ages further attests to their intrinsic

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus Christ Savior and Lord*, (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1997), 86.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

power and reliability. Christians widely acknowledged the virgin birth already in the early second century and possibly by the end of the first century. Aristides in 140 described the virgin birth as a fact of Christianity.⁵⁰

And finally:

Another legitimate reason for including the virgin birth among the essentials of the faith is that it is a powerful testimony to the breadth and wonder of God's grace. It graphically shows that salvation comes "from above" and that the source of our hope and confidence lies in the living God who entered into human history in the historical figure of Jesus Christ. The virgin birth marks off the origin of Christ from the human race just as his end is marked off by the resurrection (Karl Barth). It is a witness to both *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, for Mary believed before she conceived. It should be recognized that these points corroborate the truth of these stories but by no means establish their truth.⁵¹

In preaching Advent we must make the connection for our people to see how the virgin birth of Jesus and His incarnation give us a picture of how God would like us to view the world. Bessenecker writes:

Why on earth would God choose to be born among a defeated people in a backwoods town under a shadow of dishonor through a dirt-poor, unwed teenager? Solidarity, that's why. The very first statement Jesus ever voiced about his concern for poor, oppressed, marginalized people was when he cried out as one of them – eyes shut tight, mouth open wide, wailing, kicking, shaking and dripping with blood and amniotic fluid. It was one of the most profound acts of solidarity with the poor he could make. He cast his lot not with the world's emperors or with the rich and powerful but with the world's demoralized peasants. When God voted with his birth, he voted for the poor. It was the fulfillment of a long-awaited plan for God to live among the people he had made.⁵²

Though the virgin birth is crucial to the moment of incarnation it is certainly not limited to it. John's gospel gives us a further picture of incarnation and excludes the infant narratives altogether. D. A. Carson wrote the following comments on John 1:14:

⁵⁰ Ibid., 93.

⁵¹ Ibid., 94.

⁵² Scott A. Bessenecker, *The New Friars; The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor*, (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2006), 59-60.

For the first time since v. 1, the term *ho logos*, ‘the Word’, reappears. At this point the incarnation, the ‘in-fleshing’ of the Word is articulated in the boldest way. If the Evangelist had said only that the eternal Word assumed manhood or adopted the form of a body, the reader steeped in the popular dualism of the Hellenistic world might have missed the point. But John is unambiguous, almost shocking in the expressions he uses (*cf.* especially Barth, pp. 85ff.): *the Word became flesh*. Because succeeding clauses in this verse allude to Exodus 33:7 – 34:35, it is tempting to think this first clause does the same. The ‘tent of meeting’ was the place where the Lord ‘would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend’ (ex. 33:11). In Exodus Moses hears the divine name spoken by God himself, and this is followed by God’s word written on two stone tablets. Now John tells us, God’s *Word*, his Self-expression, has become flesh.

This is the supreme revelation. If we are to know God, neither rationalism nor irrational mysticism will suffice: the former reduces God to mere object, and the latter abandons all controls. Even the revelation of antecedent Scripture cannot match this revelation, as the Epistle to the Hebrews also affirms in strikingly similar categories: ‘In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son’ (Heb 1:1-2). The Word, God’s very Self-expression, who was both with God and who was God, became flesh: he donned our humanity, save only our sin. God chose to make himself known, finally and ultimately in a real, historical man: ‘when “the Word became flesh”, God became man’ (Bruce, p. 40).⁵³

Erickson’s comments on the implications of the incarnation for faith and theology follow:

The doctrine of the full humanity of Jesus has great significance for Christian faith and theology:

1. The atoning death of Jesus can truly avail for us. It was not some outsider to the human race who died on the cross. He was one of us, and thus could truly offer a sacrifice on our behalf. Just like the Old Testament priest, Jesus was a man who offered a sacrifice on behalf of his fellows.
2. Jesus can truly sympathize with and intercede for us. He has experienced all that we might undergo. When we are hungry, weary, lonely, he fully understands, for he has gone through it all himself (Heb. 4:15).
3. Jesus manifests the true nature of humanity. While we are sometimes inclined to draw our conclusions as to what humanity is from an inductive examination of ourselves and those around us, these are but imperfect instances of humanity. Jesus has not only told us what perfect humanity is, he has exhibited it.

⁵³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1991), 126-127.

4. Jesus can be our example. He is not some celestial superstar, but one who has lived where we live. We can therefore look to him as a model of the Christian life. The biblical standards for human behavior, which seem to us to be so hard to attain, are seen in him to be within human possibility. Of course, there must be full dependence upon the grace of God. The fact that Jesus found it necessary to pray and depend upon the Father is indication that we must be similarly reliant upon him.

5. Human nature is good. When we tend toward asceticism, regarding human nature, and particularly physical nature, as somehow inherently evil or at least inferior to the spiritual and immaterial, the fact that Jesus took upon himself our full human nature is a reminder that to be human is not evil, it is good.

6. God is not totally transcendent. He is not so far removed from the human race. If he could actually live among us at one time as a real human person, it is not surprising that he can and does act within the human realm today as well.⁵⁴

The incarnation of Christ involved a humbling that humankind is unable to fully appreciate. Grenz comments:

The Chalcedonian formulation incorporated the central features of late patristic incarnational Christology. That Christology focused on the condescension and self-humiliation of the divine Logos, the Son, in taking to himself human nature.⁵⁵

Rather, the Son gave up the independent exercise of these powers. In other words, although he retained all the attributes, powers, or prerogatives of God, the earthly Jesus refused to draw on his divine abilities merely at his own whim. Rather, he willingly submitted his prerogative to use his divine capabilities to his Father's will as directed by the Spirit.⁵⁶

This modified *kenosis* theory has gained prominence, especially among evangelical theologians. Other evangelicals, however, gravitate toward a further modification. The purpose that in the incarnation the Son voluntarily set aside the continuous use of his divine powers, in order that he might grow as a human.⁵⁷

Grenz sees within the incarnation of Christ both revelation of God and the divine and human Jesus. This reality moves us beyond worship that is seasonal only at Advent and propels us to worship Jesus all year long.

⁵⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 721-722.

⁵⁵ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 399.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 400.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 401.

When we look first at Jesus of Nazareth, we arrive at the conclusion we explored in this chapter and which the apostles confessed: In this one historical, personal life we find revealed who God is and who we are to be – true deity and true humanity. As this human being, Jesus is divine. In this affirmation, which is a confession about the entire life of Jesus, lays the significance of the confession of the incarnation. Rather than a description of some purported activity of the eternal *Logos*, “incarnation” is a Christological confession. It capsulizes what we find in Jesus of Nazareth, namely, that he is the “word” – the dynamic, revelatory word of God – in human form.

The foundation for this confession, Jesus is the incarnate one, is not limited to Jesus’ birth. All of his life, including his resurrection as the confirmation of his claims concerning himself, indicates that in Jesus the Word has come in the flesh. In short, we do not celebrate the incarnation merely at Christmas, but throughout the church year climaxing at Easter.⁵⁸

Central to the doctrine of incarnation is the purpose for which Christ became a human. The infant narratives tell us plainly that the Son of God is given for the salvation of the human race. As we further study the purpose of the incarnation we soon realize that the humanity of Jesus was to be our atoning sacrifice.

Here John R. W. Stott comments on the first chapter of John’s Gospel:

John’s emphasis in his letters was on the incarnation. Because he was combating an early heresy, which tried to sever Christ from Jesus, the divine Son from the human being, he insisted that Jesus was ‘the Christ come in the flesh’ and that anyone who denied this was Antichrist. Nevertheless, he saw the incarnation as being with a view to the atonement. For God’s unique love was seen not so much as in the coming as in the dying of his Son, whom he ‘sent...as an atoning sacrifice for our sins’ and whose ‘blood...purifies us from every sin’.⁵⁹

Stott sees the incarnation directly in relationship to the atonement.

The person and work of Christ belong together. If he was not who the apostles say he was, then he could not have done what they say he did. The incarnation is indispensable to the atonement. In particular, it is essential to affirm that the love,

⁵⁸ Ibid., 405.

⁵⁹ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1986), 36-37.

the holiness and the will of the Father are identical with the love, the holiness and the will of the Son. God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself.⁶⁰

This means the cost of the incarnation involved the humbling of God in becoming human but greater than humbling was the price he paid for our redemption.

The New Testament never presses the imagery to the point of indicating to whom the ransom was paid, but it leaves us in no doubt about the price: it was Christ himself. To begin with, there was the cost of the incarnation, of entering into our condition in order to reach us. Certainly we are told that when God sent his Son, he was ‘born under law, to redeem those under law’ (Gal. 4:4-5). Jeremias wonders if Paul was alluding to ‘the dramatic act of entering into slavery in order to redeem a slave,’ just as the giving of the body to be burnt (I Cor. 13:3) may refer to being ‘branded with the slave-mark. Beyond the incarnation, however, lay the atonement. To accomplish this he gave ‘himself’ (I Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:14) or his ‘life’ (his *psychē*, Mk. 10:45), dying under the law’s curse to redeem us from it (Gal. 3:13).

When indicating the costly price paid by Christ to ransom us, however, the commonest word used by the New Testament authors was neither ‘himself’ nor his ‘life’ but his ‘blood’. It was ‘not with perishable things such as silver or gold’, wrote Peter, ‘that you were redeemed... but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect’ (I Peter 1:18-19). The writer to the Hebrews, steeped as he was in sacrificial imagery, emphasized that Christ was victim as well as priest, since ‘he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood’.

But what is meant by Christ’s ‘blood’? Everybody agrees that it alludes to his death, but in what sense? Picking on the threefold assertion in Lev. 17:11-14 that ‘the life of a creature is in the blood’ or ‘the life of every creature is its blood’, and the even more straightforward statement of Deut. 12:23 that ‘the blood is the life’, a strangely popular theory was developed by British theologians at the end of the last century that Christ’s blood stands not only for his death but for his life, which is released through death and so made available for us.⁶¹

But the New Testament does not represent Christ as eternally offering himself to the Father. To be sure, father, Son and Holy Spirit give themselves to each other in love eternally, but that is reciprocal, and in any case is quite different from Christ’s specific historical sacrifice for sin. It is also true that the incarnation involved sacrifice, since by becoming flesh the Son both ‘emptied himself’ and ‘humbled himself’ (Phil. 2:7-8), and throughout his public ministry he demonstrated that he had come ‘not to be served but to serve’. But, according to

⁶⁰ Ibid., 160.

⁶¹ Ibid., 179.

his teaching and that of his apostles, the climax of his incarnation and ministry was his self-giving on the cross as a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45).⁶²

Bloesch sees that getting the incarnation right for our theology is central to avoiding heresy and living fully in the mystery of God in Christ.

The heresies of the church all have their source in the often well-meaning attempt to rationalize or resolve the Christological paradox. They generally constitute an effort to exalt one nature to the detriment of the other. By contrast, orthodoxy exercises reason in order to safeguard the mystery of faith. It recognizes in humility that the full depth and breadth of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ far surpasses human comprehension, though it still throws much light on the human predicament and on the divine solution to this predicament.⁶³

When we examine the depth of the theological meaning the coming of Christ reveals, we must ask how we should preach so that we respond appropriately. This picture of worship, rejection, and incarnational confession all point to the length that God went to secure our salvation. Our worship should reflect gratitude that is appropriate to the magnitude of the Advent message.

Centuries ago, William Wilberforce wrote that:

The Bible is one of God's greatest gifts to humanity. It tells us of the greatest gift that men and women have longed for throughout the ages and of which the prophets spoke about for centuries. When Jesus finally came, His arrival was hailed by the angelic host with the exclamation, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). How can you measure the value of the good news of Christ? It is spoken of in the Bible as light in the darkness, freedom from slavery and life from death. Look at how much the Early Church valued the message. They received it with great joy and overflowing gratitude.⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid., 267.

⁶³ Bloesch, *Jesus Christ Savior & Lord*, 70.

⁶⁴ Bob Beltz, *Real Christianity: A Paraphrase in Modern English of A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country, Contrasted with Real Christianity, Published in 1797 by William Wilberforce, Esq. Member of Parliament for the County of York.* (Ventura: Regal Books, 2006), 23.

Seeing Christ as our highest value causes us to resist letting other values steal our worship from us. Again Wilberforce writes:

But if it is true that the Bible teaches that the supreme object of our affections is to be God, and if in fact any of these things that distract us have taken the place only He rightfully deserves, then in truth we have become disloyal to God. God desires to set up his throne in our hearts and reign there without a rival. In some, the revolt is obvious and overt. In others, it is hidden. But in both cases, we have become estranged from our rightful Lord. Giving our supreme devotion to a career is just as much an act of spiritual treason as giving our body to acts of immorality or our energies to greed and thievery. The external appearances might be different, but the principle is the same. If we do not return our allegiance to its rightful Lord, we will suffer the consequences when the things that are highly valued by men are shown to be nothing but abominations in the eyes of God.⁶⁵

This means that our worship should directly reflect our view of material things.

When earthly reward is of the highest value to us and worldly shame is viewed as the greatest of all possible evils, we are prone to change the course of our obligations to God and seek a way to do them that avoids the natural consequences of taking a stand against the cultural norm. We seek to serve God in ways that enable us to keep earthly gain and avoid worldly disapproval. Or we simply quit attempting to serve God fully.⁶⁶

Worship must not simply be a pious resisting of worldly desires but rather an active response to those who are suffering in the world.

We could say that the primary purpose of true Christianity is to root out natural selfishness and all that comes with it in order to help us develop a proper sense of who we are and what our obligations are to our fellow human beings. Benevolence is the driving principle of authentic Christianity. It is a direct result of developing a lifestyle of moderation in the pursuit of pleasure and affluence, a degree of indifference to the things culture has decided are important, diligence in the performance of personal and civil responsibilities, a commitment to doing the will of God, and a patient and trusting attitude toward the providence of God in one's response to the unpredictable and often discouraging events of life. A life of authentic faith will produce humility in our lives. Humility is essential if a man or woman is to develop a spirit of genuine benevolence.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid., 74-75.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 88-89.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 155.

Wilberforce, who was instrumental in ending the slave trade in England, exhorts us to action in response to our worship of God.

Get going. Be useful, generous, moderate and self-denying in your manner of life. Treat the lack of positive action on your part as sin. If God chooses to bless you with material prosperity, don't use it on the absurd task of keeping up with the current trends and fads. By using your money modestly and without display, show that you are not a slave to fashion. Be an example of someone who uses his or her wealth for purposes that are more important than showing off or making a big impression. Demonstrate through the way you live that worldly things are not even close to the value of heavenly things.⁶⁸

A contemporary writer, Mark Labberton follows Wilberforce's stream of thought as he regards worship to be central to the way believers respond to justice issues.

This disparity between economics and justice is an issue of worship. According to the narrative of Scripture, the very heart of how we show and distinguish true worship from false worship is apparent in how we respond to the poor, the oppressed, the neglected and the forgotten. As of now, I do not see this theme troubling the waters of worship in the American church. But justice and mercy are not add-ons to worship, nor are they the consequences of worship. Jesus and mercy are intrinsic to God and therefore intrinsic to the worship of God.⁶⁹

Labberton goes further to suggest that our worship should be seen in the re-direction of our spending.

Vigorous biblical practice of worship should stop, or at least redirect, our endless consumerism, as our free choice to spend less in order to give away more. Our worship should be recognizable by the lives it produces, ones that plainly evidence the broad, sacrificial and preserving commitment of Jesus Christ. Our community reputation, as Scripture suggests, should be that the church comprises those who pursue justice for the poor and oppressed because that is what it means to be Christ's body in the world. We should not fool ourselves into thinking that it's enough to feel drawn to the heart of God without our lives showing the heart of God.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ibid., 196.

⁶⁹ Labberton, Mark, *The Dangerous Act of Worship*, (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2007), 37-38.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

The incarnation of Jesus is therefore also a model of worship. His humble self-sacrifice is a model and a way of life that his followers were expected to reflect.

The offering of our lives in word and action reflects the truth about God. We lie about God by misnaming him when our lives and words attribute to God what is not his. That is, we claim to be Yahweh's people of the promise. But our failure to enact and demonstrate God's purposes with lives that do justice and mercy means that people attribute to God, or associate with God, the injustice, intemperance, impatience and self-interest of God's people. The watching world makes our weaknesses God's. That misnames God.⁷¹

A recent national campaign to regain the cultural legitimacy of saying "Merry Christmas" threatened lawsuits against those who restricted or denied that freedom of expression. It was called an issue of free speech. This may be fair enough, but the real question is whether the church can actually demonstrate the presence of Immanuel, which is far more needed. The free speech issue clouds the church's attention to its real calling: to be the body of Christ. This more important reality would be clearer if, instead of boycotts and picket signs, millions of Christians chose to disconnect from a consumer-oriented Christmas and instead give that money away to those in dire need. In such an act, the incarnation would become more evident in the culture.⁷²

⁷¹ Ibid., 71-72.

⁷² Ibid., 37-38.

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Mark is the only synoptic Gospel that does not deal with the birth of Christ. This is probably due to the fact that Mark was writing primarily to a Roman audience and was writing a fast-paced book that culturally fit the Roman lifestyle. The writers of Matthew and Luke deal with the advent of Christ and incarnation; John deals with the incarnation. Together, the Gospel writers teach us about the nature of the incarnation and the Kingdom.

My goal in examining the three gospel accounts of the birth of Christ is to show a biblical theology of worship that lies within the advent story. Specifically, Jesus resisted the empire, gave Himself away relationally, and redistributed His wealth. Jesus gave us a glorious picture of worship that the church is to model, especially when we celebrate His birth – at Christmas.

Resisting the Empire

Matthew deals with the political ramifications of Christ's birth more than the other three Gospel accounts. His purpose in writing was to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament's promise of a Messiah. Matthew quotes the Old Testament more than any other writer in the New Testament and adds nine additional proofs to make his point.⁷³

⁷³ New International Version, Matthew 1:22-23, 2:15, 2:17-18, 2:23, 4:14-16, 8:17, 12:17-21, 13:35, 27:9-10. All passages are quoted from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.

Along with the proofs and other Old Testament quotations, the book of Matthew emphasizes the genealogy of Jesus as the son of David. This important distinction suggests to the readers of this genealogy that Jesus had the right to David's throne. This creates a dramatic narrative for the birth account of Jesus because the house of Israel was under occupation and they had no true kingly throne to call their own.

The Roman-appointed king of the Jews was Herod the Great. However, Herod was never accepted by Israel as such. Herod was appointed king of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C. and gained control in 37 B.C. He was a ruthless ruler who murdered his wives and sons when he felt they threatened his throne.

Even though Herod was a malicious ruler, he was also known for constructing splendid monuments, theaters, pagan altars, and other famous buildings like the temple in Jerusalem. He created a kingdom that was known for its wealth and power. Herod's empire and the overarching Roman occupation created the cultural and political context for the birth of Jesus.⁷⁴

Given this backdrop, Matthew's account becomes all the more dramatic. Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of the virgin-born Messiah (2:22-23) who has rights to the throne of David (1:1, 6) but resists the cultural norm of how one would acquire positions of power. It is clear that Matthew wants his readers to note that God is fulfilling His promises without regard for earthly power.

As Matthew writes his Gospel, he brings Herod into the story of Christ's birth to show that even Herod believed his throne was threatened by this baby-king, Jesus. The

⁷⁴ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *International Bible Encyclopedia*. William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, p 687-698

conflict with Herod is noted as significant in Matthew's account for several reasons: he uses it to show us that Jesus has the right to the throne of Israel; to tell of the angel's announcement to Joseph; and he describes the Magi's interaction with Herod.

Matthew 2:16-18, describes Herod's response to being outwitted by the Magi when they did not return to tell him where to find Jesus. He brutally murdered the entire population of boys, two-years-old and under, in and near Bethlehem. This horrible deed was consistent with Herod's way of using power. He violently reacted to all threats to his throne – especially the threat of one who was, according to the Magi, born “king of the Jews.”

In examining Matthew's account there is a subtle yet clear message in regard to the kingship of Jesus; Jesus will be worshiped as King despite all earthly powers. Jesus did not enter the world amidst pomp and circumstance; He made no run for office; nor did He vie for the throne. He resisted the empire of His day knowing that His own empire was without end.

The first chapter of the Gospel of Luke also attests to Jesus' kingly reign and of the nature of His Kingdom. In verse 32, the angel spoke to Mary about Jesus, saying, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end.”

Every Christmas as Christians seek to celebrate this great event, our worship of Christ is threatened by the lust of the eyes. Spending money, wanting things, and using our time to endorse the chaos of our consumer-culture are just some of the ways that we

forfeit our fidelity to Jesus at Christmas. Our worship of Christ is threatened by another empire.

An appropriate application is to resist the empire of consumption as we stand in the historical narrative of Matthew's Gospel, proclaiming to the world that we serve a different King whose Kingdom is one of giving ourselves to others and redistributing our wealth, not hoarding for ourselves.

Relational Giving

One of the key components of the birth story of Jesus is that God gave us His Son. The Gospel writers are telling us that God gave us a relational gift when He gave us Jesus.

Matthew 1:23 quotes from Isaiah 7:14, stating, "they will call Him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us." The significance of this verse demonstrates that *God with us* is a relational promise, which offers us all the attributes of God, given for our benefit and His glory.

It is also a relational statement because it speaks of the care and the proximity of God to His people. No longer will God be far off, but now, through Jesus, He has come near. He is, in fact, *with us*.

Luke's account offers us another angelic announcement, this time to the shepherds who were watching their sheep. In chapter 2 verse 11 we find, "Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord."

Luke gives the shepherds a promise that this Savior is born to *you*. The pronoun tells us that Jesus is a gift and His birth is for *us*. The application is as important for us in

2008 as it was to the shepherds when the angels announced this good news. God has given *us* a Savior!

The whole Bible reveals a consistent theme of man's depravity before God and our helpless state. Therefore, this announcement of the birth of Christ is highly significant. The coming of Jesus into the world offers the possibility for all humankind to be saved.

We are unable to save ourselves. Romans 3:23 tells us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This makes the angels' declaration about Jesus all the more personal and meaningful. We need a savior and He has been given to us and for us.

We also see this relational gift of Jesus in John's Gospel. In the first chapter, John describes the incarnation of Jesus. "In Him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it."⁷⁵ John brings out our need for life and declares to us that this life is only found in Jesus. Later in the chapter he declares to us the personal nature of this offering of life and the free access we now have to it by faith. "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."⁷⁶

Here we clearly see the relational nature of the gift of Jesus Christ. God opened the doorway for salvation as the prophets foretold; the possibility of being born of God through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the opportunity that God has given to the whole world through Jesus Christ.

⁷⁵ John 1:4-5.

⁷⁶ John 1:12-13.

As we examine the relational gift of the birth of Jesus Christ, we must ask ourselves if our current practice of giving during the celebration of His birth is in line with the relational way that God gave His Son. One cannot imagine the Magi of Matthew's Gospel giving each other expensive gifts while standing in the presence of the baby Jesus.

Our culture has taken Christians captive and many Christ-followers have become co-opted by another gospel - the gospel of consumerism. This counterfeit gospel has usurped the relational gift of Jesus with material gifts that promise salvation from boredom by tantalizing us with things that are initially exciting but will eventually come to nothing.

The Bible clearly tells us that God gave us His Son for our salvation. How can we apply this relational gift to our current practice of celebrating Christmas? I suggest that we do this by giving relational gifts ourselves.

When we resist the empire we are freed up in both time and money to give relational gifts. Now we can creatively give one another the gift of ourselves. By making gifts that are personal and meaningful, we can enter into the story and encourage one another to worship the relational God.

This is a great way to proclaim the Gospel; we give relational gifts because God has given a relational gift to the world for the purpose of our salvation.

In learning to give relational gifts we begin a spiritual exercise whereby we become more like Jesus, as we learn to love, give, and sacrifice. In relational giving, we stand in contrast to a culture of consumption and materialism for the sake of glorifying Jesus.

Re-Distribution

The apostle Paul tells us in the book of Colossians that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”⁷⁷ This passage demonstrates the supremacy of Christ and His glorious state. In short, the world and all that is in it belongs to Jesus. All wealth, power and authority are His.

The theological doctrine of incarnation is all the more stunning when we consider what Jesus *gave up* in His incarnation. Not only did He leave the glory of heaven but He also limited Himself in His attributes as God by becoming flesh and blood. His omnipresence is just one such attribute. By taking the form of a human, Christ limited Himself from being everywhere at once, thus confining Himself to the physical limitations of humanity without losing the qualities of deity. It is difficult to put a price on just such a limitation for as humans we cannot appreciate the attributes of deity. It is fair to say, however, that the cost was quite high to Christ, and this is just one example.

Philippians chapter 2 verses 6-11 says: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is

⁷⁷ Colossians 1:15-17.

above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Jesus Christ, being fully God, was willing to deny Himself the benefits of His deity and title to become a baby born into a sin-scarred world. Why did He do that? In 2 Corinthians 8:9, Paul says: “For you know the grace of our Lord, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” Paul makes this statement in the context of teaching the church about generosity. He takes the picture of Jesus’ incarnation and uses it to demonstrate why the Corinthians should be a generous and sacrificial people.

Jesus gave up the glory of heaven to become our substitute on the cross. In doing so He took from His wealth, namely His righteousness and sinless nature, and redistributed those things to us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 tells us that, “He who knew no sin became sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”

These texts show us that a great cost was paid and a great exchange took place. Jesus gave us His righteousness and took our sin. We took His wealth and exchanged it for our poverty. Thus it is fair to say that Jesus redistributed His wealth to us by entering the world as a human baby born in the weakness of human flesh.

The heart of the Christmas story for us as Christ-followers is the reality that we are a people who in our abject poverty are met with the righteous wealth of our God. Now we must ask how we can apply such a truth to our contemporary celebration of Christmas. The answer is that we should model Christ’s generosity by redistributing *our* wealth to those in need, just as we were in need when Christ met us.

By participating in this way we are once again stepping into the theology of the Bible and experiencing the birth story of Jesus Christ firsthand. We will find ourselves, with generous hearts, redistributing the money saved on Christmas gifts because we are a people compelled by the love of God. We are a people who are grateful to our God having grasped the supreme sacrifice He made by becoming flesh and dwelling among us.

Worship

Matthew and Luke's accounts of the birth of Christ are rich with worship. John's Gospel gives us an account of the incarnation in philosophical and theological terms but also paints a rich picture of worship as well. Worship is at the heart of the story of Jesus' birth and it is something that we must recapture for our contemporary congregations.

Too often we have grown so accustomed to the Christmas story that we lose sight of the power of the moment. As we examine these three Gospels, we will see the compelling picture that the writers painted to draw us to Christ.

In Matthew's account we find Mary conceiving Jesus by the Holy Spirit. This gives us early insight to the divine nature of the Christ child. This is followed by the angel pronouncing to Joseph that this child indeed is from the Holy Spirit and is the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14.

In Matthew 2:2, the Magi come from the east inquiring the whereabouts of the Christ child for they came to worship Him. Searching out the astronomical signs they discover the child and immediately bow down to worship Him. This is a significant picture of these Magi at worship for they are non-Jews and the gospels point to the

universal nature of the gift of Christ and His worthiness of worship by all peoples. Their immediate response is one of generosity in giving gifts of great value to the Christ.

In Luke's Gospel the picture of worship continues to unfold. Luke gives us insight into Mary's life as the mother of Jesus. In Luke 1:30-33 we find written: "But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end." The title "Son of the Most High" is significant. It points clearly to the child as the divine Son of God and to His being the Messiah.

Here we have divine title, Son of the Most High, being given to the child in Mary's womb. This is a supreme example of the incarnational mystery that moves the characters of Luke's Gospel into an act of worship.

When Mary goes to greet Elizabeth, her cousin, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and declares to Mary, "Why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy."⁷⁸

This picture of the worship of Jesus is exceptional because the baby was not yet born yet Elizabeth refers to the child in Mary's womb as her Lord. Equally unique is the "leaping" of John-the-Baptist in Elizabeth's womb indicating that even the unborn child, John-the-Baptist, was worshipping before his Lord.

⁷⁸ Luke 1:43-44.

Mary's song in Luke 1:46-56 is an anthem of worship to God for allowing her to carry the Christ child and for His good and mighty acts toward His people. This song is known in church history as the *Magnificat*. This song came from the mother of Jesus as a spontaneous and triumphant praise to God who sees and remembers the humble and carried out the promise of salvation given to Abraham many years earlier.

In chapter 2 of Luke, verses 8-14, the angels announced to the shepherds that the Christ child has been born. They were directed to go and find Him and worship Him. Then a host of angels praised God saying, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests."

After the shepherds witnessed the baby, Luke tells us in 2:20 that, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."

On the eighth day, Jesus was presented at the temple where Simeon was led by the Holy Spirit in praise to God. He had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. When he found Jesus, he held Him and declared these words of worship: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."⁷⁹

Last, Luke tells us of the account of Anna who was a devout woman who worshipped daily fasting and praying. She came up to Mary and Joseph and gave thanks

⁷⁹ Luke 2:29-32.

to God and spoke “about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”⁸⁰

Anna was an evangelist. She was preaching about Jesus as the Savior and Redeemer of Jerusalem. This is significant in that Luke used Anna’s words to show the resulting impact of the birth of Christ, not only in His salvation but in the evangelistic passion that His salvation creates in His followers.

Luke gives us a thorough account of those who worshipped Jesus and in doing so brings forth clearly that the Christ child is the Son of God, the Messiah, and should be worshipped by all people.

John’s gospel also reflects the divine nature of the Christ and gives us a strong call to worship. Starting with the Divine Logos, he states that this Word through whom the world was created, this very God, possessing life, was made flesh. Not only was He made flesh but He made His dwelling among us. This refers to the human nature of the Word.

John continues to tell his readers that, “We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”⁸¹

This prelude to the Gospel tells us that Jesus is fully God coming from the Father and displaying His Glory to others. The writer, while not giving us an overt statement about worship, gives us enough to deduce that “seeing the Glory of Jesus” is, in fact, an act of worship in itself.

With these passages from Matthew, Luke and John we can see a clear biblical theology that demonstrates that the Christ child is God and is worthy to be worshipped by

⁸⁰ Luke 2:33.

⁸¹ John 1:14.

all people. The many textures used by each writer do not contradict the other but rather enhance a fuller and richer picture of this inspired design.

As Christ-followers, this is the biblical truth we must embrace. We cannot simply be aware of this fact and not act upon it. Christ is to be worshiped as God and as we retell this story of His birth we should be compelled into worshipping our great and risen King.

It is my belief that our contemporary worship is hindered by the chaos of our consumer culture. When we resist the empire of consumerism just as Jesus did, we can avoid the chaos of the crowded malls and the fear of going into debt. When we give relationally we can focus on our family and loved ones and the meaning of Christ's birth. In doing so we learn more about the God who gives to us and we learn more about the love of those who give to us. When we redistribute our wealth we get to express the love of God to the world just as Christ expressed his love to us. These three components create the space we need in our contemporary culture to worship Christ accurately and prophetically. These applications will help pastors and their congregations to experience the story of Christ's birth and free them to worship him faithfully.

Putting It All Together

By examining the scriptures we see four strands coming together to create an accurate response to the story of Christ's birth: Resisting the Empire, Relational Giving, Redistribution, and Worship. When the first three strands come together, the fourth strand, worship, binds them all together.

As preachers, when we call our people to resist our empire of consumerism as Christ resisted all earthly powers; to give ourselves relationally as God gave His Son; and to re-distribute our wealth as Christ became poor to make us rich through His poverty, we are in fact calling our people *into* the story of Jesus.

Jesus is worthy of our worship and part of the challenge of preaching is to apply the scripture accurately into our contemporary context. Worship is the goal of preaching the story of Jesus' advent.

CHAPTER 4

THE ADVENT CONSPIRACY PROJECT

My project has two aspects to it. The first is the inclusion of four sermon outlines for Preaching Advent for Prophetic Living. The second part is a web site, www.adventconspiracy.com. The web site is a catalyst to help people in the church celebrate Christmas in a new way that keeps Jesus central to the season. The site also allows other churches to join us, by signing up and utilizing the resources.

My desire for this project is that the church will recover the theological and spiritual depth of the coming of Christ, and that we will celebrate it in a way that is prophetic. I want the culture to stop and notice that God gave His Son when no one was looking.

In order to communicate to a broader audience, I have re-named my four themes, so that Worship Jesus becomes Worship More, Resist the Empire becomes Spend Less, Relational Giving becomes Give More, and Re-distribution becomes Love All. Worship More, Spend Less, Give More, and Love All is the motto for the campaign and the navigational layout for the web site.

The idea for the Advent Conspiracy started in 2006 while I was studying for this project. Four other pastors and I started the experiment of preaching Advent to encourage our congregations to respond to Jesus without consumerism. First of all, we asked our congregations to scale down the amount they would normally spend on Christmas. Second, we taught them to give more relational gifts that were creative and meaningful in light of God giving us His Son. Third, we collected an offering, collecting

the money they did not spend on Christmas. To our surprise we collectively brought in close to \$500,000. My congregation, Imago Dei Community, brought in \$110,000.

We focused on the global water crisis and used the money to drill wells through Living Water International. According to the World Water Council, 1.1 billion people live without clean drinking water; 2.6 billion people lack adequate sanitation; 1.8 million people die every year from diarrheal diseases; and 3,900 children die every day from water born diseases. It is estimated that 10 billion dollars a year could get clean water to everyone on the planet.⁸²

My hope for this project is that the global church will join us and be a leading voice for the water crisis in the developing world. Redirecting the monies we normally spend during the holidays would be a prophetic and biblical way, during the Advent season, to worship Christ who is our living water.

The inspiration for the project comes from the rich biblical and theological meaning of the incarnation of Christ coupled with the gluttony of consumerism during Christmas.

C.S. Lewis rightly stated the following in his essay entitled, *What Christmas Means to Me*:

Three things go by the name of Christmas. One is a religious festival. This is important and obligatory for Christians; but as it can be of no interest to anyone else, I shall naturally say no more about it here. The second (it has complex historical connections with the first, but we needn't go into them) is a popular holiday, an occasion for merry-making and hospitality. If it were my business to have a 'view' on this, I should say that I much approve of merry-making. But what I approve of much more is everybody minding his own business. I see no reason why I should volunteer views as to how other people should spend their own money in their own leisure among their own friends. It is highly probable

⁸² D. Zimmer & D. Renault, "Water Crisis Facts and Figures", World Water Council, 2003, <http://www.worldwatercouncil.org/index.php?id=25>.

that they want my advice on such matters as little as I want theirs. But the third thing called Christmas is unfortunately everyone's business.

I mean of course the commercial racket. The interchange of presents was a very small ingredient in the older English festivity. Mr. Pickwick took a cod with him to Dingley Dell; the reformed Scrooge ordered a turkey for his clerk; lovers sent love gifts; toys and fruit were given to children. But the idea that not only all friends but even all acquaintances should give one another presents, or at least send one another cards, is quite modern and has been forced upon us by the shopkeepers. Neither of these circumstances is in itself a reason for condemning it. I condemn it on the following grounds.

1. It gives on the whole much more pain than pleasure. You have only to stay over Christmas with a family who seriously try to 'keep' it (in its third, or commercial, aspect) in order to see that the thing is a nightmare. Long before December 25th everyone is worn out -- physically worn out by weeks of daily struggle in overcrowded shops, mentally worn out by the effort to remember all the right recipients and to think out suitable gifts for them. They are in no trim for merry-making; much less (if they should want to) to take part in a religious act. They look far more as if there had been a long illness in the house.

2. Most of it is involuntary. The modern rule is that anyone can force you to give him a present by sending you a quite unprovoked present of his own. It is almost blackmail. Who has not heard the wail of despair, and indeed of resentment, when, at the last moment, just as everyone hoped that the nuisance was over for one more year, the unwanted gift from Mrs. Busy (whom we hardly remember) flops unwelcomed through the letter-box, and back to the dreadful shops one of us has to go?

3. Things are given as presents which no mortal ever bought for himself -- gaudy and useless gadgets, 'novelties' because no one was ever fool enough to make them like before. Have we really no better use for materials and for human skill and time than to spend them on all this rubbish?

4. The nuisance. For after all, during the racket we still have all our ordinary and necessary shopping to do, and the racket trebles the labour of it.

We are told that the whole dreary business must go on because it is good for trade. It is in fact merely one annual symptom of that lunatic condition of our country, and indeed of the world, in which everyone lives by persuading everyone else to buy things. I don't know the way out. But can it really be my duty to buy and receive masses of junk every winter just to help the shopkeepers? If the worst

comes to the worst I'd sooner give them money for nothing and write it off as a charity. For nothing? Why, better for nothing than for a nuisance.⁸³

⁸³ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 304-305.

Sermon One⁸⁴

Title: God Gave a Relational Gift.

Idea: God is with us and that changes everything.

Introduction: God in Sudan.

- Drum beat
- Water tower, campsites, and singing.

Transition statement: Christmas was different. They had nothing to give each other but it did not matter – they still had something to celebrate. It dawned on me, as I reflect on that time, that they had God with them, therefore it changed everything as they sang out. That is what we are going to talk about today.

Passage: Matthew 1:18-25

Questions: What about that passage brings that kind of significance? How does having God with us change everything?

- I. God is with us because He gave His Son (Matthew 1:18-25).
 - A. A son whose rightful place would have been as a King.
 - B. Little that the Jewish couple would have known.
 - C. Empires had them by the scruff of the neck.
 - D. Historical promise from God who would set things right.
 1. Illustrate idea of king with Princess Diana – people’s King.
 2. Apply: Because He came as the “people’s King” we can expect Him, by His Spirit, in every facet of our everyday human lives.
 - a. He sits around the campfire in Sudan.
 - b. He shows up as heaven coming down to earth in the form of water in Liberia.

⁸⁴ This sermon was developed with Heather Thomas, a member of the pastoral staff at Imago Dei Community. I worked with her for three months by taking her through the stages of sermon development and helped her through the entire process. She preached this sermon at Imago Dei Community, Portland, OR on December 2, 2007.

- c. He makes His love and grace known through carols on a rainy drive up to Seattle.
- d. He enters into the laughter of children on Christmas morning around a decorated tree.

3. Questions:

- a. Where is your campfire?
- b. What is your leprosy and do you anticipate Him there?

II. God is with us to free us from sin (Matthew 1:20-21).

A. Illustrate: Friend who works as an advocate for human trafficking. Video: NBC Dateline, 5-year-old being rescued, by a man, from “prison/ brothel.”

B. Apply: Vivid picture. God sent His Son to give us freedom.

- 1. Freedom from prisons other people inflict on us and the courage and strength to be transformed by His grace and walk toward recovery.
- 2. Freedom from the prisons we inflict upon ourselves: thought-addiction, abuse, greed, and anger.
- 3. Freedom from the darkness of sin we inherited by being human.
- 4. What is our response to that?
 - a. Wonder if that little Cambodian girl was, years later, invited to his birthday.
 - b. Wonder how grateful she would be that he was born.
 - c. Wonder how we should celebrate at the birth of the One who takes us out of the prison of sin.
 - d. I would want to worship at His birth the same way she would celebrate.

III. God is with us: if we believe and obey it changes everything (Matthew 1:22-25).

A. Read v. 22-25 and explain Prophet Isaiah, chapter 7.

B. Narrate Joseph and Mary and how they may have felt.

C. Application examples: How we obey if we believe in this story.

1. Friend in England who lived a promiscuous life and seduced men into adulterous affairs but was transformed into a faithful wife and mother.
2. Couple in our community who sold their home in the suburbs to live among the poor in downtown Portland.

Conclusion: As you consider your life in light of His birth, life and the presence of God-with-us, where is He inviting you to believe and obey? It will change everything.

Go back to the campfires and the sound of the drum that beats out “God is with us – God is with us – God is with us.”

Can you hear the drum beat? It asks, “Will you be free? Will you believe and obey?” Because God is with us – God is with you.”

And since His birth the beat has been going on and it sings a song that is sung all over the globe that we sing as we worship today the God who is with us. And when we believe and obey Him, it changes everything.

Sermon Two

Title: Worship More Spend Less.

Idea: Worship Jesus our King and all other Kingdoms will fade away.

- I. The Kingdoms of the world demand our admiration at the risk of our souls (Matt. 2:1-8)
 - A. Historical background on Herod.
 1. Herod was a great builder who rebuilt the temple and made it larger and more efficient.
 2. Herod was a ruthless leader who killed, through military might, to conquer the region of Judea.
 3. Herod was a wealthy king who lived a life of luxury.
 4. Herod was an insecure leader who killed his own family members when he felt his empire was threatened.

- B. Today's kingdom of consumerism is an empire that is built on impressive materialism, convenience, entertainment, and luxury. It is estimated that we will spend 455 billion dollars on Christmas this year in America alone.⁸⁵
- II. Jesus is not impressed with any other kingdom and we shouldn't be impressed by them either (vv. 9-12).
- A. Jesus ignored Herod by entering the world as King of the Jews in weakness and poverty.
 - B. His Kingdom is authenticated by God, not worldly power, wealth and security.
 - C. His birth and ministry will show that he is unimpressed with worldly systems and kingdoms.
 - D. He is not a zealot nor is He unaware of the culture and kingdoms of His day.
 - E. He is focused on the Kingdom of God with steadfast faithfulness.
 - F. We need to cultivate the spiritual discipline of ignoring the Herods of our culture for the sake of our allegiance to another Kingdom.
 - 1. We should not become zealots protesting the kingdoms of the world.
 - 2. We should ignore the flash of this world for the eternal weight of the Kingdom of Jesus.
- III. We worship the eternal King of an eternal Kingdom (vv. 13-23).
- A. Herod was threatened by this child born into poverty and ordered the slaughter of all the baby boys in Bethlehem.
 - B. God subverted Herod's powers by waking Joseph in a dream.
 - C. God's plan of salvation will not be threatened by another kingdom.
 - D. Those who follow Jesus and willingly suffer for the sake of His Kingdom will never be threatened by the empire of power, wealth, efficiency and materialism.

⁸⁵ The National Retail Federation News Release, "NRF Sees Subdued Holiday Gains in 2006", September 19, 2006, <http://www.nrf.com/content/default.asp?folder=press/release2006&file=holidayforecast0906.htm>, (accessed 4/7/08).

- E. We should worship Jesus this Christmas in a way that resists our cultural Herod that tells us to spend more and worship less.

Conclusion: This morning we stand before two distinct kings. One of worldly power, wealth and might, and the other of heavenly power, spiritual wealth and spiritual might. Which one will you worship this Christmas? The Gospels ring true again this Christmas telling us to worship Christ and resist the empire.

Sermon Three

Title: Give More and Love All.

Idea: Sacrificial worship comes from valuing God's sacrifice.

- I. The value of Christ is worth everything we have to worship him with (Matthew 2:9-12).
 - A. The Magi travelled a great distance
 - B. The Magi risked their personal safety.
- II. The value of Christ is seen in the humility in the incarnation as God picks up the tab for our salvation.
 - A. Philippians 2:5-11.
 - B. Narrate the moment that Christ left the heavenly realm to become human.
 - 1. A son going off to war.
 - 2. A Son going off to die.
 - 3. A family being broken up.
 - 4. Jesus turns toward his room in heaven, not to pack his bags but to empty them. This is what is happening at his birth.
 - 5. Illustration: Becoming voluntarily blind so that you could show your blind child how to make it through life. Our voluntary blindness would be nothing compared to what Jesus gave up.
- III. The value of Christ is worthy of financial sacrifice (Matthew 2:11-12).
 - A. The Magi responded to Jesus through giving sacrificially.

- B. When we understand the greatness of the incarnation we willingly give.
- C. Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but we fail to worship when we are always grasping at being like God.
- D. Worship that is sacrificial is also incarnational in that it requires us to humble ourselves before God.

Conclusion: We participate in the grand story of God's redemption when we understand the great value of Christ. He is worthy of our worship and our sacrifice. Will we humble ourselves with Christ so that we can live in the center of God's great plan of redemption? As we give our Advent offering we do it because God gave us His Son and we worship Him.

Sermon Four

Title: Worship That Satisfies

Idea: God has brought Salvation into the world in Jesus: the answer to every heart that puts its hope in God alone.

Introduction: Illustrate how every Christmas we are met with disappointment after we open our gifts only to realize that our hope in material things fades like a vapor. What we truly need is to discover someone who can satisfy our hearts in a way that will never fade away. We see this in a man named Simeon and woman named Anna in the Gospel of Luke.

- I. Jesus satisfies the worshipper who longs for God's salvation (Luke 2:21-33).
 - A. Narrate the story of old Simeon shuffling his feet toward the couple.
 - B. Simeon was a worshipper who longed for God's salvation alone.
 - C. Simeon's life was satisfied by Christ when he saw God's salvation. (What would need to happen for you to say, "Now I can die in peace because my life is satisfied"?)
 - D. Simeon's song depicts Jesus as God's satisfying salvation for the whole world and that includes us.
- II. Jesus' gift of salvation confronts our hearts with who or what we truly worship (Luke 2:34-35).

- A. Simeon prophesied the confrontational effect that Jesus' salvation would have on humanity.
 - B. Explain: Christmas is not for children because Jesus' coming would bring about division and rejection of those who would not worship Him.
 - 1. Jesus would cause many to fall and rise in Israel.
 - 2. Jesus would be spoken against.
 - 3. Jesus would reveal what people worship.
 - C. All of us defend the things that are sacred to us and those are the things that Jesus confronts.
 - D. Some people will fall down and worship and some will fight him.
 - E. What will you do with Him? Will you worship Him as your satisfying salvation or despise Him for threatening what you truly worship?
- III. Jesus becomes the worshipper's salvation story to share with the world (Luke 2:36-40).
- A. Narrate the story of Anna shuffling over and getting in on the action and taking the baby out of Simeon's arms.
 - B. Explain: Anna was a faithful worshipper longing for God's redemption.
 - C. Explain: Anna preached the Gospel of Jesus to all who longed for God's redemption because Jesus had become her salvation story.
 - D. Illustration: My wife and I did an interview with NPR on Advent Conspiracy.⁸⁶ At one point we were asked the question, "Can anyone do Advent Conspiracy regardless of their beliefs?" I answered, "Anyone can spend less and give meaningful gifts and use their money for charity but that is not what Advent Conspiracy is. All of those things are just small signs of the main thing, which is our worship of Jesus, and His coming into the world as a baby to bring salvation. That is our story to tell and it is a very different story than simply celebrating Christmas differently."

⁸⁶ Rick and Jeanne McKinley, interview by Michel Martin, "Bringing Back Christ at Christmas," *Tell Me More*, National Public Radio, December 25, 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17578296>, (accessed April 7, 2008).

Conclusion: God has given the salvation that will satisfy every worshipping heart but not every heart will worship him. His invitation is to worship Jesus as your satisfying salvation.

The Website

I have enclosed a CD of the website www.adventconspiracy.org. I worked with a designer and provided the written content. The supplementary content and video is a result of Advent Conspiracy participants whom I asked to contribute to the final product.

To start the website follow these instructions:

1. Insert CD in computer.
2. Open CD.
3. Click on the Launch.Html button in the window. Your web browser will open.
4. Click through the site just as you would navigate through any other web site.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

The Advent Conspiracy had two areas of evaluation. One is quantitative. Here I will look at the number of churches that joined us, the money that was raised and how it was distributed. I will also look at the statistics of the web site understanding how many hits the site received and where the people viewing the site were from. Finally, I will look at what people said we could do better as well as suggest some changes for the next Advent season.

The second area of evaluation is qualitative and is much more subjective. Here I will give a sampling of some of the stories we heard from around the world as well as the media attention that we received.

Quantitative Evaluation

Imago Dei Community, Portland, OR raised \$200,000 for their Advent Conspiracy projects.

\$25,000: Almost-Free Store (650 people of low economic means).

\$10,000: \$1,000 to each of the following on-going city-serving ministries:

- **3 o'clock People** (food and friendship for adults without homes) – sleeping bags, gloves, socks, and tarps.
- **Belmont Foundation** (assistance for boys and their single moms) - scholarships for campers.
- **Big Brothers Big Sisters** (mentors for at-risk youth).
- **Elderly Ministry** (assistance for forgotten elderly).
- **REACH Ministries** (mentors for families with children infected with HIV/AIDS) Christmas gifts for infected children.
- **Refugee Ministry** (assistance for internationally displaced people living in Portland) – Household items; laundry soap, cleaners, food staples, etc.
- **Ronald McDonald House** (dinners for families with seriously ill or injured children).

- **SE Apartment Ministry** (mentoring and relationship building with subsidized housing residents) – canopies for Bible club activities and craft supplies.
- **Scarlet Cord** (friendship, peace and help to prostitutes) – hygienic supplies, clothes, underwear, etc.
- **Wild Hope** (friendship and help to youth without homes) – a mobile outdoor Christmas party and prepaid telephone calling cards.
- 10% to cover the administrative cost of facilitating the global Advent Conspiracy project.
- 70% to be given to Living Water; Intl. for clean water wells globally.
- 30% to be given to other global projects.

Imago Dei also put on a Do-It-Yourself workshop.⁸⁷ We had over 400 people come through the workshop which focused on teaching people how to make meaningful gifts for their loved ones at a low cost.

Participating Churches and Organizations

A total of **732** churches/groups signed up to be a part of the Advent Conspiracy project.⁸⁸ These churches represent a great cross-section of different denominations and types of congregations.

World Relief International also used Advent Conspiracy as their Christmas campaign with contacts to over **500** additional churches. A total of **17** countries were represented.

Funds Raised and Redistributed

As of 1/10/08 - 26 churches and groups have reported back to us with a total of \$1,222,643.00 redistributed both locally and globally.

⁸⁷ See Appendix 1 for a sample of the brochure.

⁸⁸ See Appendix 2 for a spreadsheet of the churches.

The following is a breakdown, by church, of their redistribution projects:

Ecclesia in Houston, TX raised \$100,000.00, which they gave to Living Water, Intl. for clean water projects.

Red Sea Church, Portland, OR raised \$10,000. They gave 25% to Living Water Intl., 25% to church planting, 25% to world issues such as the sex trade and 25% to local projects.

Grace Christian Church in Tinton, NJ raised \$15,000 and gave the following:

- Between \$1500 and \$2,000 was redistributed to 20 at risk children through a local ministry (Aslan Youth Ministry) and provided with Christmas blessings they never would have been able to enjoy or afford.
- Around \$200 was divided between 4 families with 8 children through the Angel Tree program for families whose mothers and father are currently incarcerated.
- Over \$5,000 dollars was collected and redistributed to help 5 different local families pay rent, electric bills, replace water heaters, and buy groceries, and purchase clothes and other Christmas gifts.
- They held a food and hygiene drive to benefit 2 local ministries (Family Promise and The Center), which exceeded \$500 in donated items. Hundreds of clothing items were gathered and redistributed in various different places to those in the community who had need.
- 9 children were adopted through World Vision's child sponsorship program.
- \$3900+ was donated at their Christmas Eve Services with 75% going to local needs and 25% going to World Vision's West African Water Initiative to provide clean water for people in Niger. The Conrad Hilton Foundation through a matching grant doubled every dollar we donated.

Jacob's Well Church in Kansas City, MO raised \$65,000 that they gave to Living Water International.

Christ-Bridge Fellowship in Tomball, TX raised \$6,200.00. They gave \$3,000 to Living Water, International and the rest to needs in their local community.

Grace Chapel, Wilsonville, OR raised \$50,000 of which they gave \$42,000 to Living Water International for a well rehab project in Liberia. The rest went to local projects including prison and homeless ministries, their local JOY DRIVE and needs in their local schools.

Neighborhood Church in Memphis, TN raised \$600.00. They are giving 25% to Living Water International and the rest went to local refugee family's basic needs.

Living Water Bible Fellowship in Alamosa, CO raised \$2,363. They gave \$1,182.00 to clean water projects and gave the rest to local needs.

Eastpoint Church in Spokane Valley, WA raised \$60,000. They gave \$15,000 to Living Water, Intl. and are using the rest to support their Single Mom's Pantry and the development of a job and life-skills training center for single parents in their area.

Brookings Church of the Nazarene in Brookings, OR raised \$4,924 for their denomination's compassionate ministries which are working on clean water wells in Africa and South America.

Liberty Community Church in Bealeton, VA raised \$3,700 that they are giving to Living Water, International.

Emmanuel Baptist Church in Crestview, FL raised \$47,000. They gave \$11,200 to Bibles Unbound (Voice of the Martyrs); \$16,000 to Blood Water Mission for clean water wells; and \$19,000 for missionary support.

Threads Church of Portage, MI raised \$10,000, which they gave to clean water projects through Blood Water Mission.

Heartland Fellowship in Chilliwack, B.C., Canada, raised \$3,500 which they gave to the EmbraceAids.org 2-year campaign, a local Community Service Literacy Program, and a variety of global ministries.

Mosaic of Arlington, TX raised \$2,000 that they gave to Living Water, International.

Park Street Brethren Church in Ashland, OH raised \$12,128. They gave \$3,000 to Living Water International and the rest to a local outreach ministry and to funding an orphanage in Peru.

First United Methodist Church in WV raised \$2,178 that they gave to Living Water International.

Arts and Communication Magnet Academy Bible Study, Portland, OR consists of high school students who raised \$70 to give to Living Water International to support clean water globally.

New Life Church in Everett, WA raised \$81,500.

- They gave \$34,000 to drill wells in Cambodia at 16 orphan homes they partner with. \$6000 went to the purchase of rice for the same children.
- Through a partnership with World Concern, they were also able to immunize 19,200 children, give away 1,080 ducks, 1,840 chickens and 166 goats in Southeast Asia.
- In Kazakhstan they purchased 360 Bibles and gave \$4,200 for church planting.

- Locally, they provided gifts for 45 foster children and lots of meals for the homeless in their city.

Victory World Church in Atlanta, GA raised \$240,000. They are supporting International Justice Aid clean water projects in Ethiopia and Joshua International Ministries in Sierra Leone where they will be building 15-20 new wells near a hospital they are building there.

Fellowship of Oso Creek in Corpus Christi, TX raised \$3,000 in just 2 weeks. They gave half to Living Water International and gave the rest to 2 local ministries serving the homeless and addiction recovery.

Report from Stan Patyrak, Assistant Vice President, Living Water International, website: (<http://www.water.cc>). Phones: direct, 281-207-7829; cell, 281-881-0583. Report sent via email, March 2008, to Imago Dei Community staff members. “As we did last year, Living Water International (LWI) is being very purposeful to send 100% of all Advent Conspiracy monies directly to the field. From the \$5 donation made by a family on Christmas morning, to monies received from churches across the US, all of it is going directly towards clean water projects. We are still awaiting some funding, but I want to let everyone in on what has happened to date with funds that have been received – as well as give some information on what is in store once additional funding comes in.

LIBERIA - 30 deep wells are in process of being drilled in Mount Barklay, Liberia – ending the entire region’s water problem. An estimated 25,000 people in the immediate area will be served. Before the new wells, communities would utilize creeks, mud-holes, swamps and the river for drinking water. LWI is working closely with community development organizations (our brother Saah Joseph and his group), and clean water has proven to be a mighty access into the heart of each village. School attendance immediately increased once the well was drilled at the school. Instead of kids bringing their dirty water to school, they are currently bringing empty jerry cans to school with them – so they can bring clean water back home. Saah tells me that some of the chiefs are in a state of wonder... it seems to them that all of heaven has opened up for their villages in the last few months.

LWI is also working in partnership with AC to rehabilitate/repair 350 broken/open-top wells in Liberia. On average, one repaired hand-pump or well rehab restores water to approximately 1,000 people.

PERU- 10 new wells are in progress in Peru. LWI Peru is reaching native tribes along the Amazon River –communities that can only be reached by boat – days along the river. Local pastors are working alongside drilling crews in every community.

INDIA - LWI India, in partnership with a church from AC, has drilled two wells.

SUDAN - LWI is in-process of 25 well repairs/rehabs in desperate communities in Southern Sudan. Anticipated funding will be used to repair wells in Haiti and Sierra Leone. More details on that and other projects soon!

Please let me know if I can answer any questions. I will be forwarding reports as we get them from the field. Thank you all again and again for providing a cup of water in Jesus’ name. Our drill and repair teams are sharing the story of AC to the communities they are working in. Christmas is changing the world.”

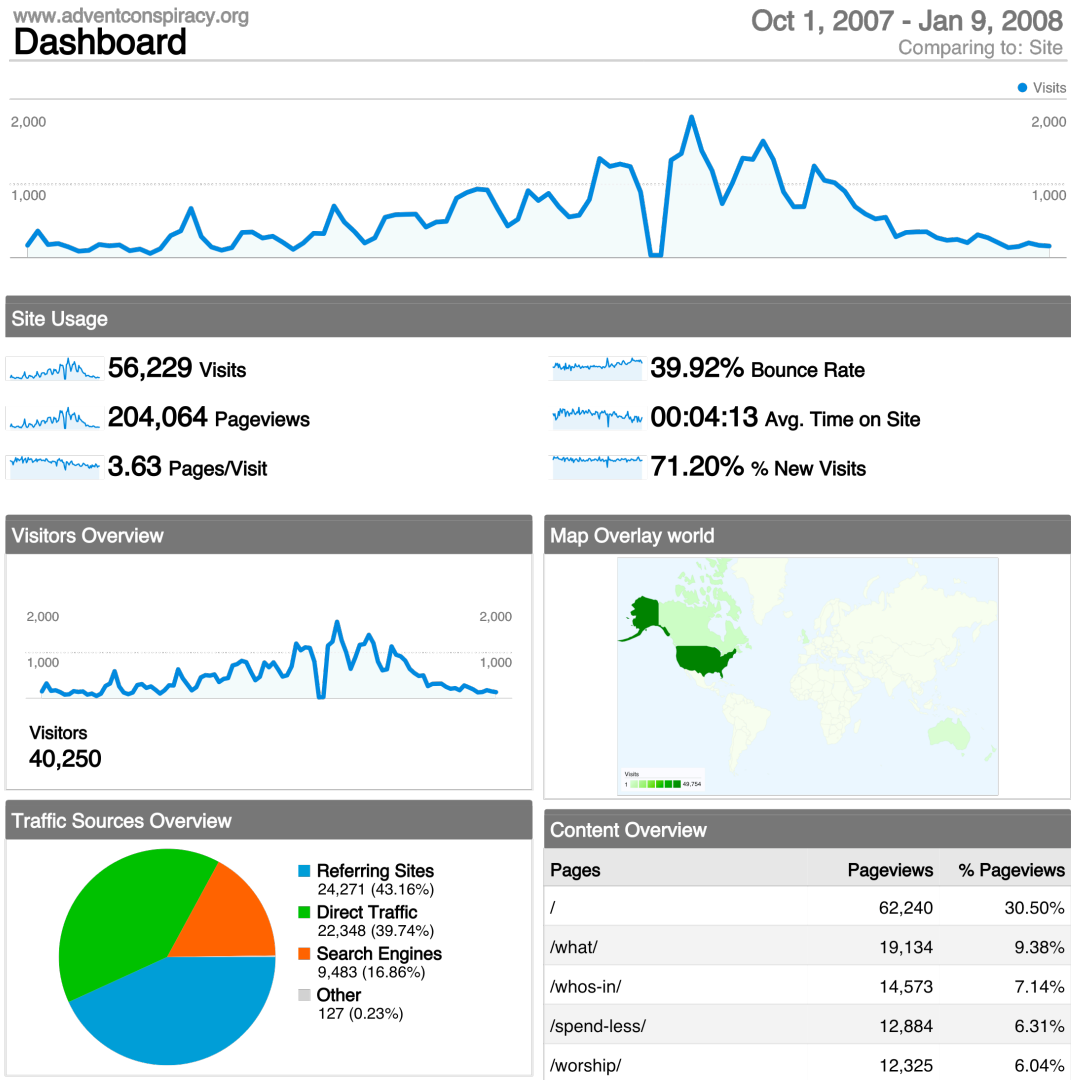
Feedback from Participating Churches

Participating churches asked us to make the following improvements:

1. Have resources available earlier in the year for pastors to plan and execute the project in their churches. (This was a common suggestion.)
2. A DVD of the videos that could be readily used.
3. A book to be written about the project.
4. Shorter video clips.
5. Ideas for planning worship times.

Web Data

The following data is provided by Google Analytics (a personal web-graphing tool that tracks web statistics with current trends and obtains accurate web tracking data).⁸⁹




⁸⁹ Google Analytics, <http://www.google.com/analytics>, (accessed January 9, 2008).




40,250 people visited this site

 **56,229 Visits**

 **40,250 Absolute Unique Visitors**

 **204,064 Pageviews**

 **3.63 Average Pageviews**

 **00:04:13 Time on Site**

 **39.92% Bounce Rate**

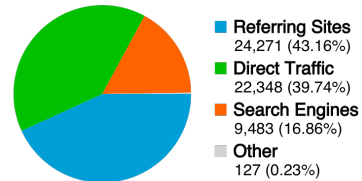
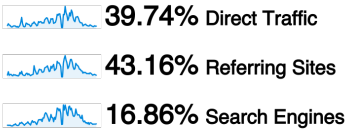
 **71.27% New Visits**

Technical Profile

Browser	Visits	% visits	Connection Speed	Visits	% visits
Internet Explorer	31,527	56.07%	Cable	21,331	37.94%
Firefox	17,378	30.91%	DSL	15,573	27.70%
Safari	6,569	11.68%	Unknown	12,771	22.71%
Opera	299	0.53%	T1	4,309	7.66%
Camino	199	0.35%	Dialup	1,518	2.70%

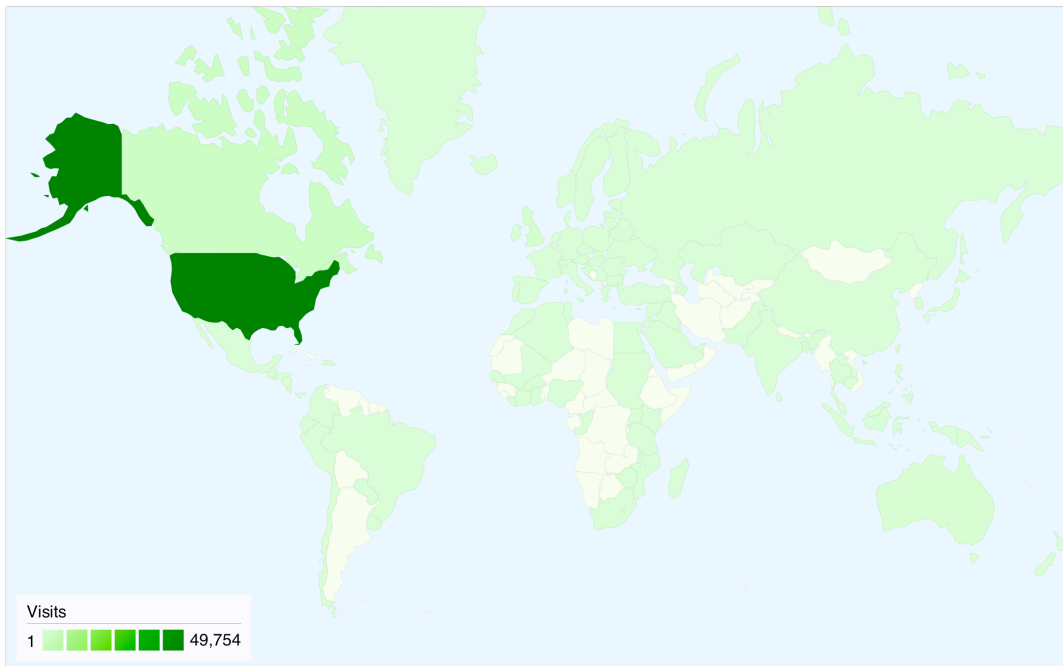


All traffic sources sent a total of 56,229 visits



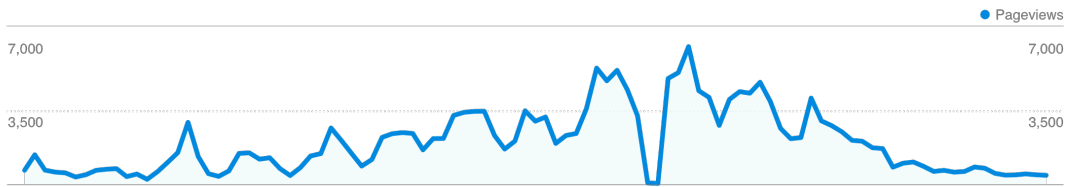
Top Traffic Sources

Sources	Visits	% visits	Keywords	Visits	% visits
(direct) ((none))	22,348	39.74%	advent conspiracy	6,355	67.01%
google (organic)	8,138	14.47%	the advent conspiracy	445	4.69%
imagodecommunity.com	2,152	3.83%	adventconspiracy	269	2.84%
facebook.com (referral)	1,256	2.23%	adventconspiracy.org	230	2.43%
fermiproject.com (referral)	842	1.50%	www.adventconspiracy.org	161	1.70%



56,229 visits came from 122 countries/territories


Site Usage						
Visits 56,229 % of Site Total: 100.00%	Pages/Visit 3.63 Site Avg: 3.63 (0.00%)	Avg. Time on Site 00:04:13 Site Avg: 00:04:13 (0.00%)	% New Visits 71.25% Site Avg: 71.20% (0.07%)	Bounce Rate 39.92% Site Avg: 39.92% (0.00%)		
Country/Territory	Visits	Pages/Visit	Avg. Time on Site	% New Visits	Bounce Rate	
United States	49,754	3.67	00:04:14	70.98%	39.50%	
Canada	2,896	3.81	00:04:27	70.86%	37.53%	
United Kingdom	1,000	3.04	00:03:50	60.00%	45.00%	



Pages on this site were viewed a total of 204,064 times

 **204,064** Pageviews

 **162,842** Unique Views

 **39.92%** Bounce Rate

Top Content

Pages	Pageviews	% Pageviews
/	62,240	30.50%
/what/	19,134	9.38%
/whos-in/	14,573	7.14%
/spend-less/	12,884	6.31%
/worship/	12,325	6.04%

Qualitative Evaluation

Media

I was surprised at how word spread around the country of the project. Several newspapers and media outlets got wind of it and interviewed me in regards to the project. Palmer Holt of “In Christ Communications” was very excited about Advent Conspiracy and he offered to do a press release for free. Part of the requirement that I requested from him was to do a local press release for all of the churches that participated so they could get local coverage of what their specific church was doing. Palmer agreed and provided a great resource for pastors. Several of them took advantage of it.

I was pleased to read of pastors who were given credit for the Advent Conspiracy idea through their local media. I believe it will help those local churches to be a witness for Christ.⁹⁰

I have provided a sampling of the some of the newspaper articles from around the United States in Appendix 3.

Personal Stories

One of the greatest joys of the project was to hear of the thousands of stories from around the world and in our congregation about how this project helped people worship Christ more at Christmas. My primary goal as a pastor is to make disciples of God’s people and help others to do the same.

⁹⁰Indianapolis Star, “*A \$200 Challenge to Give Not Buy*,” December 9, 2007, Appendix 3.

This is a small sampling of some of the stories:

1. *John Bradshaw of Fellowship of Oso Creek* shared this story:

Praise God! Thanks for sharing the heart of Advent Conspiracy as God used to bless us and our community! The most exciting part was seeing folks get excited about compassion over consumption. I had quite a few people mad at me that we didn't begin earlier! (We didn't do any pre-publicity – we just began the first week in October.) They were excited about worshipping in a way that would bless Jesus!

Our little church collected \$3,000 in just 2 weeks! We are giving half of it to Living Water International . . . and split up the other half evenly between two local ministries that are serving the homeless; and folks who are seeking to recover from an addiction and reintegrate into culture. We brought the director of one of the ministries up front last Sunday and gave him the check and let him share how the monies would be used, and our folks loved it. It was awesome.

Now, here's the best part — God has given us a huge vision for AC next year. I've already begun talking to other pastors; we've bought a website and we're gonna get 50-100 churches in Corpus involved! We also have a vision to have a community-wide Christmas Eve service as a climax to the giving.

2. *James Alison of Grace Chapel* shared:

Advent Rehab! This Advent was truly a rehab time for Grace Chapel. From the design of the lobby to the weekly focus on the "Four Principles of

Advent Conspiracy,” we saw our community go through a detox of what Christmas has been and grasped the true meaning of what Jesus desires for our lives and the Christmas season.

We saw families adopt the concepts of “Worship More, Spend Less, Give More, Love All.” We saw junior-high kids and high-school kids say that they were satisfied for the first Christmas ever because they truly participated in Advent Conspiracy and gave relational gifts. We saw a gathering of young adults buy, wrap and deliver over 100 gifts to help make the Bridgetown Ministries Christmas Party something great. The stories are still coming in, stories of families and individuals whose lives were changed because they truly replaced “Consumerism with Compassion”.

3. *Robert Grisham of The Neighborhood Church* wrote:

St. Nicholas would be proud! I wanted to give you a quick report on the impact of Advent in our community. Like a lot of other communities, I’m pretty sure we’ll never know the extent of how this has touched people. Our church is very young. We have 10 people in our core group, and have had four public monthly services so far. At our December service we took up our first Advent offering. It was a little over \$600.

We’ll take up a second offering at our January service. It has been great to see how this has impacted our core group. The ideas that have come forth regarding relational giving have been awesome. I feel that for many of us, some of the shackles of consumerism were broken. As to redistribution, we

decided that 25% will go to clean water initiatives, and the remainder would be split between two programs here in Memphis.

The first is a non-profit called Neighborhood Christian Center. One of our members works there, and they do a lot of good work throughout the inner city. Memphis also has a pretty large number of refugees from The Republic of Burundi. There are obviously a lot of needs there, and we wanted to give as relationally as we could towards meeting some of those needs. The week before Christmas, we learned that two families of ten were moving in, and because Catholic Charities was closed for the week, they were not going to have any food. We went out and bought them gift cards to a local grocery store.

The Advent Conspiracy has given us a taste of redistribution, and I believe it's going to impact our giving throughout the year. As one of our guys said, "We're going to try to live out the Advent Conspiracy all year long."

4. *Jaron Parkins from Living Water Bible Fellowship* shared:

Thanks! We are a smaller sized congregation in a poor, rural part of Colorado. We were blessed with the themes of redistribution and resisting the empire. The Advent Conspiracy helped us understand our calling as Christians in a better way. It also helped us understand how our Christianity can so easily be enculturated in ways that aren't healthy. I think many of us were blind to how deeply entrenched we are in a consumer lifestyle. Thanks for all the work you did to get this to a national level.

5. *Kevin Campbell-White of Brookings Church of the Nazarene* wrote:

We are happy to report that we were able to raise \$4,924 to dig a well this year. We gave the money to our denomination's compassionate ministries that are currently working on clean water wells in Africa and South America.

One of the coolest things was watching our teens start a group to "boycott meaningless gifts" in the local high school to help raise money. Many of them asked for nothing but donations to this project for Christmas. It has truly been a blessing to be a part of this project and we are looking forward to doing even more next year.

6. *Mark Seagle of Emmanuel Baptist Church* shared:

AC Amazement! It has been a scandalous Christmas around our fellowship. One would almost think that it was a conspiracy. In mid-summer, our worship team leader found the AC site and we shared a simple prayer, "...what if Christmas was done differently around our fellowship?" God seemed to like that prayer.

The economic impact was huge... but, I think that the impact on hearts/ minds/ families is incalculable. Our family ministry team scripted a guide for families as we considered the conspiracy of advent (you can check it out on our website @ www.ebcrestview.com).

It has been amazing to hear the stories of kids and families wrapping their hearts and minds around the freedom of a relational Christmas that truly impacts the globe. It has been fresh to watch God elevate our level of compassion and limit our hunger for consumption. Amazing! Conspiratorial!

It has been ridiculous to be a part of this conspiracy. It is beautiful to watch a family of Christ-followers radically alter their lives in order to provide practical needs and demonstrate the supremacy of Christ to all of His creation. It has been beautiful to watch families wrap their hearts, lives, and passion around an Advent filled with conspiracy, wonder, and awe of the coming King of Glory.

The conspiracy is good. May the coming of Christ leave us under compulsion to elevate His glory throughout the year.

7. *Vincent Rife* shared this story from *Grace Christian Church*:

A child's heart! We have been struggling to make ends meet this year. God has always provided, and somehow we have not gone into debt, but it has been close...so close that despite my desire to trust God deeply, I have had moments of fear. This provides the backdrop for my story.

I wanted to help my children grasp the "compassion not consumption" aspect of the Advent Conspiracy. I told them how there are little ones like them from around the world who do not receive gifts at Christmas. Some children do not even know who Jesus is. Many of them do not have basic things that they need, like clean water, food, good doctors, good schools and a safe home.

Since we had little extra this year, I told the kids that I had a cup full of change I wanted to cash in at the bank to give to children in need. I asked them if they would like to give some money from their piggy banks. They

replied that they would. I took their banks down from their dressers and let them begin shaking out the coins.

“You can stop now if you want,” I said after a moment or two. My oldest looked at me with sweet, wide eyes and said, “Oh, no, Mommy. These kids need this money. I don’t really need it. I want to give them ALL of it.”

Without missing a beat, the younger sibling agreed enthusiastically. Both insisted on emptying their banks completely. I almost cried. I thought about all that I hold back from God, how I hesitate to give it all. And here they had received a simple idea and immediately were willing to give everything.

I felt God reminding me that I need to have faith like a child. Jesus’ words speak well over this story: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven... whoever humbles himself like this child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”
– Matthew 18:3-4.

8. Letter from *Bobbi Clark, leader of ACTS4U* who received funds from Grace Church.

Tent City. Dear Grace Family, ACTS4U is thankful for your recent donations! On Christmas Day, our crew caravanned 4 fully-loaded SUV’s and trucks filled with resources to be distributed to both the Square and to the people of Tent City in Lakewood, NJ. Along with other community donations, our crew was able to appropriate these items to the tent encampments: 50 gallons of water, 6 propane tanks for heaters, women’s toiletries, 160 new hats and gloves, 200 pairs of socks, 175 flashlights with

extra batteries, 200 new shirts, 30 plastic bins, 3 commodes from ACTS4U Senior Ambulatory Supplies program, and \$200.00 Home Depot gift cards for future propane tanks. Our community donor, Branches Catering, provided ACTS4U with 26 full rack pans of food which allowed our crew to serve 170 community members a most delicious, hot meal ! Please know that we are thankful for the redistribution of resources that enable us to serve others in our community in a direct way that not only meets their need, but also restores their hearts with a sense of hope by showing Christ's love to others as He has shown us! Wishing the entire Grace Family a Happy New Year! Bobbi Clark
- ACTS4U.

Final Evaluation

The Advent Conspiracy became much larger than I intended. The glaring discrepancy is that out of 732 churches that signed up through our site only 26 have reported back. The desire to have them report back was to share with the world and with one voice that God changes the world when his people worship him faithfully.

There are three reasons why I believe the reporting as of January 7, 2008 is so low:

1. We have not given the churches enough time to report back. Several churches have told us they still have money coming in and they are not exactly sure where they will give the money yet. This is further supported by the fact that World Relief who partnered with us to represent another 500 churches don't

expect to have any reports back from their churches until sometime in February.

2. Churches signed up and participated but did not follow through.
3. Churches signed up but did not participate after initial excitement.

To get the best possible response I have organized a call-down through my church. Volunteers will contact the churches individually; each church provided a contact person when signing up. With 100 volunteers we should be able to contact them by phone and e-mail. My hope is that many more will respond.

I want to emphasize that I do not want them to respond for boastful reasons. I believe, however, that a diverse group of churches rallying together to celebrate Christ's birth through bringing love and justice to the world is a great proclamation to the world that the church is one.

APPENDIX 1

BROCHURES



Advent Conspiracy is an international movement restoring the scandal of Christmas by worshipping Jesus through compassion, not consumption.

Christ tends to get overlooked at Christmas. Let's be honest. December comes and you think, "Ok, this is the year." This time you swear you'll slow down and take it all in. Make the most with family. Help the needy. Zero in on what it really means to be a Christ follower during this Holy Season.

What if you could inspire your church, your family and yourself to avoid being consumed by commercialism this Christmas?

WORSHIP MORE
SPEND LESS
GIVE MORE
LOVE ALL


a d v e n t
C O N S P I R A C Y
WWW.ADVENTCONSPIRACY.ORG



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APPENDIX 2

CHURCH REGISTRATIONS

ADVENT CONSPIRACY - Rick McKinley – 2007

Church	City	State	Country
The Church at Shelby Crossings	Calera	AL	Australia
The Brisbane Church	Brisbane QLD	AL	Australia
Townsville	Mysterton	AL	Australia
Millgrove Baptist	Millgrove	Vic	Australia
North Gate Church - Western Australia	Pearsall	W.A.	Australia
New Vision Ministries	Marsh Harbour	Abaco	Bahamas
Friends Church	Sofia	CA	Bulgaria
Solomon's Porch	Athabasca	AB	Canada
YWAM Missional Community	Calgary	AB	Canada
First CRC	Calgary	AB	Canada
Southridge Community Church	Lloydminster	AB	Canada
Oak Park Church of Christ	Calgary	AB	Canada
The Annex	Cochrane	AB	Canada
Bridgepointe Church	Edmonton	AB	Canada
Mill Woods Assembly	Edmonton	AB	Canada
Community of Hope	Edmonton	AB	Canada
Fort McMurray Alliance church	Fort McMurray	AB	Canada
Heartland Fellowship	Chilliwack	BC	Canada
Broadmoor Baptist Church	Richmond	BC	Canada
The Joshua House	Richmond	BC	Canada
Saturday Night Church – Manitoba	Landmark	Man.	Canada
Summerside - Prince Edward Island	Prince Edward	ME	Canada
The Spot	Moncton	NB	Canada
Whitepine Baptist - New Brunswick	Riverview	NB	Canada
Eastern Canadian District Youth Ministries	Cobourg	NY	Canada
Hanover	Hanover	NY	Canada
First Scarborough	Scarborough	Ontario	Canada
Caledon Hills Fellowship Baptist Church	Caledon East	Ontario	Canada
Westside Community Church	Mississauga	Ontario	Canada
Chartwell Baptist Church - Clarkson	Mississauga	Ontario	Canada
Cornerstone Fellowship	Nottawa	Ontario	Canada
Bonar-Parkdale Presbyterian Church	Toronto	Ontario	Canada
Saanich Baptist	Victoria	BC	Canada
Saint John	New Brunswick	NB	Canada
Takasago	Takasago City Hyogo		Japan
Bangsar Lutheran Church - Federal Territory	Kuala Lumpur	F.T.	Malaysia
Internacional	Mexico City		Mexico
Filadelfia	Puebla		Mexico
Iglesia Bautista Peniel de Monterrey	Monterrey, N. L.		Mexico
Centro	Monterrey, Nuevo Leon		Mexico
Salt & Light Community Church	Tauranga	AS	New Zealand
St Paul's Auckland	Auckland	Auckland	New Zealand

cession community	Pakuranga	Auckland	New Zealand
Tota, Àies	Manila	AL	Philippines
Christian	Surigao City	GU	Philippines
Jesus:Supreme Overruling Shepherd	Angono	Rizal	Philippines
St.Paul's & St.George's Scottish Episcopal Church	Edinburgh	Scotland	Scotland
Grace	Escombe	MP	South Africa
AFM-Apostolic Faith Mission	Uppington		South Africa
Iglesia Betania Salou	Salou	PR	Spain
Iglesia Evangelica de Salou	Tarragona	PW	Spain
Shema Community (Geneva, Switzerland)	Geneva		Switzerland
SouthWye	Hereford	MD	UK
Northolt Grange Baptist Church	Northolt	Middlesex	UK
Solent	Portsmouth	MS	UK
	Downham		
Feltwell Methodist Chapel	Market	Norfolk	UK
East	Barnet	CO	UK
Oasis Church	Chadwell Heath	Essex	UK
Metropolitan	Bournemouth	PW	UK
Community Covenant Church	Fairbanks	AK	USA
Mountain View Baptist Church	Huntsville	AK	USA
Soldotna Bible Chapel	Soldotna	AK	USA
Sojourn Church	Huntsville	AL	USA
New Life Assembly of God	Woodstock	AL	USA
Westwood Baptist Church	Alexandria	AL	USA
Journey Church	Auburn	AL	USA
Cove United Methodist Church	Hampton Cove	AL	USA
Discovery UMC	Hoover	AL	USA
Cornerstone Bible Church	Lillian	AL	USA
Overlook Presbyterian Church	Mobile	AL	USA
Grace Bible Church	Rainbow City	AL	USA
Mount Prospect Baptist Church	Wedowee	AL	USA
STMLOTV		AL	USA
Glory Kids	Des Arc	AR	USA
Oak	Little Rock	AR	USA
Citrus Gardens Christian Fellowship	Mesa	AZ	USA
Spring of Life Christian Church	Mesa	AZ	USA
Manzanita Baptist Church	Kingman	AZ	USA
Light	Cave Creek	AZ	USA
Living Word Chapel	Oracle	AZ	USA
Willow Hills Baptist church	Prescott	AZ	USA
Scottsdale Baptist Church	Scottsdale	AZ	USA
The Life at Scottsdale	Scottsdale	AZ	USA
NCCC	Castroville	CA	USA
Trinity Life Center	Citrus Heights	CA	USA
Emmaus Church Community	Penryn	CA	USA
Flood Sacramento	Sacramento	CA	USA
St. Clare's Episcopal Church	Pleasanton	CA	USA
Trinity Baptist Youth	Livermore	CA	USA
Community Life Fellowship	Altadena	CA	USA

Xclaimed Ministries	Anaheim	CA	USA
The Beloved House Church	Azusa	CA	USA
First	Chula Vista	CA	USA
Chestnut Avenue Community Church	Concord	CA	USA
Christ Community Church	Concord	CA	USA
St. Raymonds Catholic Church	Downey	CA	USA
Crosswinds Church	Dublin	CA	USA
Cornerstone Christian Church	El Dorado Hills	CA	USA
Living Waters Christian Fellowship	Fairfield	CA	USA
Orangethorpe UMC	Fullerton	CA	USA
Galt UMC	Galt	CA	USA
Torrey Pines Christian Church	La Jolla	CA	USA
The Lamb's Fellowship	Murrieta	CA	USA
First Presbyterian Church	Newhall	CA	USA
Revolt Collective	Oxnard	CA	USA
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church	Palm Desert	CA	USA
Living Word Fellowship	Porterville	CA	USA
Broken places ministry	Rancho Cordova	CA	USA
Church	Red Bluff	CA	USA
Vineyard City Church	Redding	CA	USA
Mission Gathering Christian Church	San Diego	CA	USA
Kaleo Church	San Diego	CA	USA
San Francisco Lighthouse	San Francisco	CA	USA
Mission Bay Community Church	San Francisco	CA	USA
The River Church Community	San Jose	CA	USA
Golden Gate House Church Network	San Rafael	CA	USA
Vintage Faith Church	Santa Cruz	CA	USA
Clubdust	Santa Cruz	CA	USA
Symbol Society	Ventura	CA	USA
Calvary	Yuba City	CA	USA
DCF	Bakersfield	CA	USA
Missiongathering Christian Church	San Diego	CA	USA
Kaleo Fellowship	Bakersfield	CA	USA
Ethur	Corona	CA	USA
Thrive Ministries	Folsom	CA	USA
Church	Mission Viejo	CA	USA
GRX	Sunnyvale	CA	USA
Christ the King	Castle Rock	CO	USA
Delta Teens Home Church	Delta	CO	USA
The Experiment	Arvada	CO	USA
Origins Community	Boulder	CO	USA
Hillside Church	Aurora	CO	USA
Leadership Network	Boulder	CO	USA
Emmaus Road Community	Boulder	CO	USA
Discovery Christian Church	Broomfield	CO	USA
International Students, Inc.	Colorado Springs	CO	USA
The Salvation Army	Colorado Springs	CO	USA
Church of the Holy Redeemer	Denver	CO	USA
The Next Level Church	Englewood	CO	USA

New Life Christian Reformed Church	Grand Junction	CO	USA
Foothills Bible Church - Junior High Group	Littleton	CO	USA
Higher Point Christ Fellowship	Brighton	CO	USA
Roots Church	Boulder	CO	USA
The Next Level Church	Englewood	CO	USA
Planet Youth	Longmont	CO	USA
Blue Sky Church	Loveland	CO	USA
Lighthouse Ministries Int'l.	Danbury	CT	USA
East Hampton Bible Church	East Hampton	CT	USA
Valley Brook Community Church	Granby	CT	USA
Georgetown Community Church	Washington	DC	USA
University Town Church	Vancouver	DC	USA
Avenue United Methodist Church	Milford	DE	USA
New Providence Community Church	Ft. Lauderdale	FL	USA
Mosaic Miami	Miami	FL	USA
First Baptist Church of Pompano Beach	Pompano Beach	FL	USA
Shalimar United Methodist	Shalimar	FL	USA
Emmanuel Baptist Church	Crestview	FL	USA
UF Wesley Foundation/University UMC	Gainesville	FL	USA
Westside Community Church	Apopka	FL	USA
Emmanuel Baptist church	crestview	FL	USA
Calvary Chapel Sawgrass	Davie	FL	USA
New Life Community Church	DeLand	FL	USA
OakLeaf Christian Fellowship	Jacksonville	FL	USA
CommonWonder.com	Longwood	FL	USA
First Baptist Church	Melbourne	FL	USA
LifeQuest Church	Palm City	FL	USA
Holy Cross MCC	Pensacola	FL	USA
MissionWay Church	Pnte Vedra	FL	USA
Pinellas Community Church	St Petersburg	FL	USA
Hyde Park United Methodist	Tampa	FL	USA
Mosaic Miami	miami	FL	USA
Good Shepherd Wesleyan	Loughman	FL	USA
Restoration	Atlanta	GA	USA
New Covenant Church	Cartersville	GA	USA
The Jam Session (PCUSA emerging ministry)	Atlanta	GA	USA
Grace Community Church of the Nazarene	Brunswick	GA	USA
LifePoint Church	Byron	GA	USA
Open Table Community Church	Chamblee	GA	USA
Dahlonega Presbyterian (PCUSA)	Dahlonega	GA	USA
Fixmas.org	Flowery Branch	GA	USA
Revival Center	Lawrenceville	GA	USA
Victory World Church	Norcross	GA	USA
Great Commission Fellowship	Powder Springs	GA	USA
Regular Visitor	rex	GA	USA
The Church at Northside	Rome	GA	USA
Trinity Fellowship	Sharpsburg	GA	USA
The Point	snellville	GA	USA
Snellville Christian Church	Snellville	GA	USA
Church	Kennesaw	GA	USA

Christ Community Church	Watkinsville	GA	USA
Community Fellowships of Atlanta	Atlanta	GA	USA
Crossroads Church	Lawrenceville	GA	USA
Victory World Church	Norcross	GA	USA
First Baptist Church	Powder Sprigs	GA	USA
Grassroots Church	Pahoa	HI	USA
Hilo Missionary Church	Hilo	HI	USA
New Life Fellowship	Honolulu	HI	USA
Grace United Methodist Church	Marcus	IA	USA
Hammond Avenue Brethren Church	Waterloo	IA	USA
Point of Grace Church	Waukee	IA	USA
	West Des		
St. Mark Lutheran Church	Moines	IA	USA
Des Moines First Assembly of God	Des Moines	IA	USA
Marion	Marion	IA	USA
	West Des		
Immersion	Moines	IA	USA
	West Des		
Jordan Creek Family Church	Moines	IA	USA
River	Lewiston	ID	USA
Cole Community Church	Boise	ID	USA
Real Life Church	Nampa	ID	USA
Nathan Wyatt from Cole Community Church	Boise	ID	USA
Lewis-Clark State College UM Students	Lewiston	ID	USA
Trademark Church	Boise	ID	USA
New Life Community Church	Chicago	IL	USA
LaSalle Street Church	Chicago	IL	USA
Berry United Methodist Church	Chicago	IL	USA
Myanmar Hope Christian Mission, Inc.	Springfield	IL	USA
Towerview	Belleville	IL	USA
The Second Story	Peoria	IL	USA
The Orchard Community	Aurora	IL	USA
Centralia First Baptist Church	Centralia	IL	USA
First Presbyterian Church	Champaign	IL	USA
Park Community Church	Chicago	IL	USA
Second Reformed Church	Fulton	IL	USA
LifePoint	Glen Carbon	IL	USA
Fusion Church	Lake Zurich	IL	USA
Samantha Connour/ Calvary Church	Lemont	IL	USA
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	Mechanicsburg	IL	USA
Days of Grace	Morton	IL	USA
Naperville Covenant Church	Naperville	IL	USA
Jacob's Well Community Church	Normal	IL	USA
Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd	North Aurora	IL	USA
Twelve Oaks Community Church	Peoria	IL	USA
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church	Rockton	IL	USA
Wheaton Academy	West Chicago	IL	USA
Prince of Peace	Rockton	IL	USA
Delta Church	Springfield	IL	USA
St John's UCC	Hampshire	IL	USA
Nashville Christian Church	Nashville	IN	USA

First Free Will Baptist Church	Terre Haute	IN	USA
The Journey (A United Methodist Church)	Indianapolis	IN	USA
St. Elizabeth Catholic Church	Ft. Wayne	IN	USA
Cornerstone Baptist Church	Lafayette	IN	USA
Family Life Community	Pendleton	IN	USA
First Baptist Church	Alexandria	IN	USA
Dayspring Community Church	Auburn	IN	USA
New Life Wesleyan Church	Clinton	IN	USA
Westside Worship Center	Elkhart	IN	USA
The Crux	Fishers	IN	USA
Lifewater Community Church	Fort Wayne	IN	USA
LifeBridge Community	Indianapolis	IN	USA
Community Gospel Church	Nappanee	IN	USA
Grace Church of the Nazarene	Portage	IN	USA
Thorntown Christian Church	Thorntown	IN	USA
Dillman Church	Warren	IN	USA
The Mercy Group	Marion	IN	USA
New Life Community Church	Marion	IN	USA
Suncrest Christian Church	Saint John	IN	USA
Mission	Mission	KS	USA
Faith Church of the Nazarene	Lawrence	KS	USA
First Baptist Church	Augusta	KS	USA
Trinity Family	Gardner	KS	USA
Lutheran Church of the Resurrection	Prairie Village	KS	USA
West	Wichita	KS	USA
First Church of Christ	Burlington	KY	USA
The Gathering	Lexington	KY	USA
Crossroads Christian Church	Lexington	KY	USA
Faith United Methodist Church	Bowling Green	KY	USA
Flint	Fisherville	KY	USA
Th3 Waters	Florence	KY	USA
	Highland		
Baptist Campus Ministry – NKU	Heights	KY	USA
	Highland		
Asbury United Methodist Church	Heights	KY	USA
Crossroads Christian Church	Lexington	KY	USA
Plum Creek Baptist Church	Taylorsville	KY	USA
Harmony Christian Church	Georgetown	KY	USA
Baptist Campus Ministries	Lexington	KY	USA
EKU BCM	Richmond	KY	USA
Journey Christian Church	Kenner	LA	USA
Revival Temple	Walker	LA	USA
	Denham		
Glory of God Worship Center	Springs	LA	USA
Grace	DeQuincy	LA	USA
Wesley Foundation	Ruston	LA	USA
New Day Christian Center	Waggaman	LA	USA
Clint Black	Bossier City	LA	USA
Trinity Bible Church	Lafayette	LA	USA
Broadmoor Baptist Copple Sunday School			
Class	Shreveport	LA	USA

Christians in the Visual Arts Fellowship	Cambridge	MA	USA
Nashoba Grace Community Church	Holden	MA	USA
Church of St. Andrew	Littleton	MA	USA
NewSong Church	Marblehead	MA	USA
Monocacy Valley Church	Westford	MA	USA
Broadneck EP Church	Ijamsville	MD	USA
Church of God at Dundalk	Arnold	MD	USA
Christ United Methodist Church	Baltimore	MD	USA
Hope Bridge Church of the Nazarene	Frederick	MD	USA
Crossroads Church	Hagerstown	MD	USA
World Releif	Odenton	MD	USA
Frankfort United Methodist Church	Baltimore	MD	USA
Lighthouse Village Ministries	Frankfort	MI	USA
Morenci Church of the Nazarene	Grand Rapids	MI	USA
Perry Congregational Christian	Morenci	MI	USA
Renovate	Mount Morris	MI	USA
Bedford Christian Community	Muskegon	MI	USA
Sheffield Family Life Center	Temperance	MI	USA
Fair Haven Ministries	Kansas City	MI	USA
Mosaic Life	Hudsonville	MI	USA
University Reformed Church	Grand Rapids	MI	USA
Crossroads Community church	Ann Arbor	MI	USA
Federated Church	China	MI	USA
NorthPointe Church	Dowagiac	MI	USA
Kentwood Community Church	Grand Blanc	MI	USA
Edgewood Church of God	Grand Rapids	MI	USA
Kalamazoo Community Church	Ithaca	MI	USA
Moline	Kalamazoo	MI	USA
The Deep	Moline	MI	USA
Threads	Muskegon	MI	USA
Cornerstone	Portage	MI	USA
Center Park UMC	Ramsay	MI	USA
Vicksburg UMC/Heather Humm	Three Rivers	MI	USA
Lansing Central Free Methodist Church	Vicksburg	MI	USA
Williamston Free Methodist Church	Lansing	MI	USA
Minnetonka Community Church	Williamston	MI	USA
First Baptist Church	Minnetonka	MN	USA
Oak Hills Church	Cambridge	MN	USA
Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran	Eagan	MN	USA
Emmaus Road Church	St. Paul	MN	USA
Healthy Moms, Healthy Families	Hopkins	MN	USA
Bluer	Maple Grove	MN	USA
St. Paul's Lutheran Church	Minneapolis	MN	USA
Missio Dei	Minneapolis	MN	USA
Minnetonka Community Church	Minneapolis	MN	USA
Monticello Covenant	Minnetonka	MN	USA
New Joy Church	Monticello	MN	USA
Kehilat Sar Shalom	Rogers	MN	USA
Jacob's Well Church	Saint Paul	MN	USA
	Kansas City	MO	USA

Journey Christian Church	Lebanon	MO	USA
New Beginnings Church of the Nazarene	Lee's Summit	MO	USA
The Bridge	Farmington	MO	USA
Berridge Family House Church	Independence	Mo	USA
Trinity: Church of the Nazarene Church	Kansas City	MO	USA
Wellspring Wesleyan Church	Liberty	MO	USA
Deerbrook Covenant Church	Washington	MO	USA
Sau, Robbie Bolton	Lees Summit	MO	USA
Family Reunion Ministries	spring arbor	MS	USA
Clinton FUMC Youth Ministry	Picayune	MS	USA
Walker Chapel Free Will Baptist Church	Clinton	MS	USA
Mosaic	McComb	Ms.	USA
Northview Church	Billings	MT	USA
Nick McBride	Asheville	NC	USA
FaithWalk	Durham	NC	USA
Catalyst Community	Gibsonville	NC	USA
Deep River Friends Meeting	Spring Lake	NC	USA
Antioch Baptist Church	High Point	NC	USA
North Raleigh Church of the Nazarene	Waynesville	NC	USA
Calvary Baptist	Raleigh	NC	USA
Peace Covenant Church of the Brethren	Charlotte	NC	USA
Highland Presbyterian Church	Durham	NC	USA
Highlands Community Church	Fayetteville	NC	USA
Carpenter's Grove Baptist	Jefferson	NC	USA
Wellspring Community Church	Lawndale	NC	USA
Glad Tidings Church	Linwood	NC	USA
First Baptist Church	Morehead City	NC	USA
Macedonia Baptist Church	Oakboro	NC	USA
Merge	Raleigh	NC	USA
Bridges Church	Rural Hall	NC	USA
Crossroads Community Church	Stokesdale	NC	USA
For You Christ Ministries	Winston Salem	NC	USA
Missio Dei Church	Asheville	NC	USA
Connections Church	Raleigh	NC	USA
Saint Peters Episcopal Church	Washington	NC	USA
Evergreen Community Church	Raleigh	NC	USA
Eastern Sea Foundation	Stokesdale	NC	USA
The United Parish	Bottineau	ND	USA
Faith Assembly of God	Lisbon	ND	USA
Southwood Lutheran Church	Lincoln	NE	USA
Cornerstone Community Church	Concord	NH	USA
Cornerstone Community Church	Ocean City	NJ	USA
Calvary Bible Church	Somers Point	NJ	USA
Central Baptist Church	Ewing	NJ	USA
Christ Episcopal Church	Middletown	NJ	USA
New Life Ministries	Midland Park	NJ	USA
Redeemer Lutheran	Neptune	NJ	USA
The Point Church	North Brunswick	NJ	USA
Grace Christian Church	Tinton Falls	NJ	USA

WMBC	Artesia	NM	USA
West	Artesia	NM	USA
First Assembly Worship Center	Alamogordo	NM	USA
Christ Community Church of the Nazarene	Las Vegas	NV	USA
Legacy Vineyard	Las Vegas	NV	USA
Valley Christian Center	Las Vegas	NV	USA
Sandy Creek Community Church	Sandy Creek	NY	USA
New Hope Free Methodist	Rochester	NY	USA
Valley Christian Church	Heopwell Jct.	NY	USA
Church of the Redeemer	Astoria	NY	USA
	North		
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church	Tonawanda	NY	USA
	Saratoga		
New Life Fellowship	Springs	NY	USA
Calvary Assembly of God	Orrville	OH	USA
The Bridge Church	Oxford	OH	USA
Lancaster Community Church	Lancaster	OH	USA
Faith Community Church	Mansfield	OH	USA
Grand Valley Baptist Church	Rome	OH	USA
The Grove	Painesville	OH	USA
Waynesville UMC	Waynesville	OH	USA
Fairlawn West United Church of Christ	Akron	OH	USA
Park Street Brethren Church	Ashland	OH	USA
North Royalton Christian Church	Bay Village	OH	USA
New Hope Community Church	Boardman	OH	USA
First Church of God	Cadiz	OH	USA
First Christian Church	Canton	OH	USA
Vineyard Westside	Cincinnati	OH	USA
Sevenoseven	Cleveland	OH	USA
Meadow Park Church of God	Columbus	OH	USA
Upper Arlington Lutheran	Columbus	OH	USA
Stillwater United Methodist Church	Dayton	Oh	USA
Terra Nova Church	Delaware	OH	USA
Delta U.M. Church	Delta	OH	USA
Crossroads UMC	Eaton	OH	USA
Catalyst	Kent	OH	USA
Rivers Crossing Community Church	Kings Mills	OH	USA
Harvest	Manhattan	OH	USA
The Oaks Community Church	Monroe	OH	USA
High Street United Methodist	Springfield	OH	USA
Epiphany Lutheran	Toledo	OH	USA
Safe Harbor Ministries	Troy	OH	USA
Vineyard Westside	Cleves	OH	USA
St. Paul's Episcopal Church	Medina	OH	USA
Huber Mennonite Church	New Carlisle	OH	USA
Enid 1st Nazarene	Enid	OK	USA
Rivendell Fellowship	Tulsa	OK	USA
Riverwalk Community Church	Jenks	OK	USA
Oak Grove Baptist Church	Kaw City	OK	USA
Sapulpa Church of the Nazarene	Sapulpa	OK	USA
Rivendell Fellowship	Tulsa	OK	USA

Southern Hills United Methodist Church	Tulsa	Ok	USA
Snow Hill Baptist Church	Tuttle	OK	USA
Kamp's Gathering	Edmond	OK	USA
North Church	Oklahoma City	OK	USA
Oak Grove Church	Milwaikie	OR	USA
Evangel Baptist Church	Portland	OR	USA
Westside Community Church	Beaverton	OR	USA
Bethel Lutheran Church	Portland	OR	USA
ACMA Bible Study	Aloha	OR	USA
Westside Community Church	Beaverton	OR	USA
Oasis Church	Bend	OR	USA
Brookings Church of the Nazarene	Brookings	OR	USA
Doxology	Corvallis	OR	USA
Lively Stone Fellowship	Eugene	OR	USA
Jerome Prairie Bible Church	Grants Pass	OR	USA
First Presbyterian Church of Lebanon	Lebanon,	OR	USA
McMinnville Covenant Church	McMinnville	OR	USA
Crossroads Church	Portland	OR	USA
Evergreen	Portland	OR	USA
Red Sea NE	Portland	OR	USA
The Manastery	Portland	OR	USA
Crossroads Church	Portland	OR	USA
Mosaic Portland	Portland	OR	USA
Lahash International	Portland	OR	USA
Imago Dei Community	Portland	OR	USA
Sisters Community Church	Sisters	OR	USA
Village	Beaverton	OR	USA
Antioch Church	Bend	OR	USA
Grace Community Church	Gresham	OR	USA
Mt. Hood Christian Center	Gresham	OR	USA
Westport Church	Hillsboro	OR	USA
First Presbyterian Church	Klamath Falls	OR	USA
Fairview Community Church	Lebanon	OR	USA
Grace Church	Molalla	OR	USA
Eastmont Church	Bend	OR	USA
Rick Hickmann	Bend	OR	USA
Common Ground Church	Portland	OR	USA
Grace Chapel	Wilsonville	OR	USA
Lohr's Memorial United Methodist Church	Hanover	PA	USA
Harvest Wind	Gettysburg	PA	USA
Unity Community Church	Pittsburgh	PA	USA
Olive Branch Community	Clarks Summit	PA	USA
Wrightsdale Baptist Church	Peach Bottom	PA	USA
Lancaster Vineyard Church	Conestoga	PA	USA
Trinity United Methodist Church	Conneaut Lake	PA	USA
The Well	Feasterville	PA	USA
Hyde	Hyde	PA	USA
Lampeter UMC	Lampeter	PA	USA
First United Methodist	Lancaster	PA	USA
Inner Metro Green	Lancaster	PA	USA

Valley View Community Church	Oaks	PA	USA
Elk Creek Church	Oxford	PA	USA
Central Community Church	Transfer	PA	USA
Uniontown Church of the Brethren	Uniontown	PA	USA
Church In the Vineyard	West Grove	PA	USA
Twin Valley Alliance Church	Williamstown	PA	USA
Zion United Methodist Church	York	PA	USA
Christian Student Fellowship-Penn State	University Park	PA	USA
St. Andrew Church	Charlestown	RI	USA
Renaissance Church	Providence	RI	USA
First Baptist Church of Conway	Conway	SC	USA
Lake Robinson Community Church	Greer	SC	USA
Oak Pointe Church	Pelzer	SC	USA
True North Church	North Augusta	SC	USA
Living Waters Fellowship	Barnwell	SC	USA
Seacoast Church West Campus	Charleston	SC	USA
Sanctuary	Charleston	SC	USA
Vineyard Church of Greenville	Greenville	SC	USA
The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour	Rock Hill	SC	USA
Golden Corner Church	Walhalla	SC	USA
The Point	Moore	SC	USA
Bethany Student Ministries	Summerville	SC	USA
Bethany United Methodist Church	Summerville	SC	USA
Mercy Church	Sioux Falls	SD	USA
Asbury United Methodist Church	Greeneville	TN	USA
Promontorie College Ministries	Nashville	TN	USA
Third Baptist Church	Murfreesboro	TN	USA
Emmaus Church Nashville	Goodlettsville	TN	USA
Church of the Advent (Episcopal)	Nashville	TN	USA
FaithPointe Church	Adamsville	TN	USA
Christ Community Church	Athens	TN	USA
Celebration Church	Blountville	TN	USA
Chapel Hill United Methodist Church	Chapel Hill	TN	USA
Vineyard Chattanooga	Chattanooga	TN	USA
Park	Clarksville	TN	USA
Connection	Cookeville	TN	USA
St. Columille Abbey	Knoxville	TN	USA
Knoxville Life Church	Knoxville	TN	USA
Sherwood	Knoxville	TN	USA
Neighborhood Church	Memphis	TN	USA
The Catalyst of Monterey	Monterey	TN	USA
West Nashville C P Church	Nashville	TN	USA
Hope Christian Fellowship	Nashville	TN	USA
Brentwood Baptist Church	Brentwood	TN	USA
Epecho.net	Murfreesboro	TN	USA
The Ridge Church	Carrollton	TX	USA
Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church	Houston	TX	USA
Austin City Church	Austin	TX	USA
Church	Daingerfield	TX	USA
Unity Adventist Worship Center	Houston	TX	USA

North Point Christian Church	Lewisville	TX	USA
First Baptist Church	Wharton	TX	USA
Memorial Drive Presbyterian Youth	Houston	TX	USA
FBC Texarkana	Texarkana	TX	USA
Mosaic of Arlington	Arlington	TX	USA
Silver Creek UMC	Azle	TX	USA
Fellowship of Oso Creek	Corpus Christi	TX	USA
Grace Presbyterian Church	Houston	TX	USA
The Sanctuary	Rosenberg	TX	USA
Community Bible Church	San Antonio	TX	USA
TWUMC	The Woodlands	TX	USA
Vox Veniae	Austin	TX	USA
The Well Bible Church	Austin	TX	USA
Ecclesia Austin	Austin	TX	USA
Kaleo Church	Bellaire	TX	USA
Travis Baptist	Corpus Christi	TX	USA
Primera Iglesia Bautista	Eagle Pass	TX	USA
First UMC	Fulshear	TX	USA
The Basilica Community	Houston	TX	USA
Fellowship of Memorial	Houston	TX	USA
Living Water International	Houston	TX	USA
Cy-Fair Christian Church	Houston	TX	USA
First Church	Huntsville	TX	USA
Eastview Church	Lufkin	TX	USA
Crossroads Baptist Church	Marshall	TX	USA
Iglesia Bautista El Buen	McAllen	TX	USA
Living Water Church	Pearland	TX	USA
First Baptist Church Student Ministry	Salado	TX	USA
Crossbridge Church	Sugar Land	TX	USA
ChristBridge Fellowship	Tomball	TX	USA
Stonegate Community Church	Waco	TX	USA
Trinity Lutheran Church	Waco	TX	USA
Cornerstone	Wichita Falls	TX	USA
The Crossings	Katy	TX	USA
Bay Area Community Church	League City	TX	USA
Christ Church-Anglican	Plano	TX	USA
Jerry	Rio Medina	TX	USA
Redeemer Sugar Land	Sugar Land	TX	USA
Everyday Giving	Fredericksburg	VA	USA
Baylake UMC	Virginia Beach	VA	USA
Praise Fellowship	Harrisonburg	VA	USA
Northminster Church	Richmond	VA	USA
Convergence	Alexandria	VA	USA
Liberty Community Church	Bealeton	VA	USA
Kenbridge UMC	Kenbridge	VA	USA
New Hope Church	Lorton	VA	USA
The Lighthouse Foursquare Church	Lynchburg	VA	USA
New Covenant Fellowship	Manassas	VA	USA
Mount Olivet UMC	McLean	VA	USA
Friendship Bible Church	Rustburg	VA	USA

Saint James United Methodist Church	Alexandria	VA	USA
Fairlington Presbyterian	Alexandria	VA	USA
A Different Richmond	Richmond	VA	USA
Cherry Hill United Methodist Church	South Boston	VA	USA
The Morgan Church	Morgan	VT	USA
Soma Communities	Tacoma	WA	USA
New Community Church	Tacoma	WA	USA
Choices	Lynnwood	WA	USA
Harbour Pointe Church	Mukilteo	WA	USA
Agros International	Seattle	WA	USA
The Vintage Faith Community	Spokane	WA	USA
First Church of the Nazarene	Wenatchee	WA	USA
Valley Community Church	Burlington	WA	USA
New Life	Everett	WA	USA
Alathia Community Church	Issaquah	WA	USA
River Of Life Metropolitan Community Church	Kennewick	WA	USA
The Living Room Community Church	Kennewick	WA	USA
Redwood Hills Church	Kirkland	WA	USA
Sonlight Community Church	Lynden	WA	USA
Redeemer Lutheran Church	Mercer Island	WA	USA
First United Methodist Church	Olympia	WA	USA
Kaleo	Otis Orchards	WA	USA
Quest Church	Seattle	WA	USA
Shoreline Community Church	Shoreline	WA	USA
Indian Trail Church	Spokane	WA	USA
Eastpoint Church	Spokane Valley	WA	USA
Edgewood Community Church	Edgewood	WA	USA
The Journey	Mill Creek	WA	USA
Journey Church	Walla Walla	WA	USA
Christ the King Community Church	Sedro Woolley	WA	USA
The Porch	Spokane	WA	USA
Hope Lutheran Church	Fond du Lac	WI	USA
True North Community Church	Verona	WI	USA
En Gedi	Madison	WI	USA
Neighborhood	Appleton	WI	USA
WE International	Madison	WI	USA
Redeemer Christian Church	Marshfield	WI	USA
Watershed: a Community Church	Stoughton	WI	USA
Living Hope Church	Verona	WI	USA

APPENDIX 3

MEDIA

THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Date:
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The Advent Conspiracy

BurrellesLuce

THE REAL MEANING | It takes a community to change attitudes

GOING TO THE WELL

Organization wants less spent on Christmas and more donated to others.

By HELEN T GRAY
The Kansas City Star

Tim Keel has a problem with the way Christmas is celebrated. This year he found a solution.

Christmas just doesn't seem like a sacred holiday but "mostly secular with a little Jesus thrown in," said Keel, the pastor of Jacob's Well in Kansas City.

"One of the difficulties is that with the advertising and the desires of kids, it is almost irresistible to get sucked into the consumptive Christmas celebration," he said. "It really takes a community doing things together to create a different narrative about what Christmas is about."

So this year Jacob's Well, a midtown congregation of about 1,000, joined nearly 500 congregations in 10 countries as part of the Advent Conspiracy.

The effort started last year with Pastor Rick McKinley of Portland, Ore., and a few pastor friends from around the country. The idea is to spend less on Christmas, do things for others as gifts and donate the money saved to the poor.

It dawned on McKinley, pastor of Imago Dei Community, as he prepared an Advent sermon last year that the challenge is to resist consumerism and give gifts like God gives.

"These are relational gifts," he said, adding that God gives himself to people so people will give of themselves to the

poor.

Instead, McKinley said, "We celebrate Jesus' birthday by giving ourselves presents."

Imago Dei and two other congregations collected \$430,000 last year and gave most of it to Living Water International, a nonprofit project that digs wells in Third World countries.

Word of the Advent Conspiracy has spread over the Internet, with about 1,700 individuals joining. That's in addition to the congregations.

McKinley asks only one thing from his conspirators — that they give at least 25 percent of their Christmas donations to clean-water projects.

At Jacob's Well there has been a growing hunger the last several years among congregational leaders and members to celebrate Christmas more in keeping with Scripture, Keel said.

Then this fall Keel led the congregation in a 10-week study of the New Testament book of James, "which is concerned about justice for the poor and putting your faith into practice," he said. "As we began to explore how to celebrate Christmas, the consciousness and themes of James' letter came ringing through our ears."

Another experience also helped the congregation rethink the Christmas focus.

Last year Keel and five members spent 11 days in Uganda and Kenya attending a theological conference addressing problems in Africa.

"When we saw that the emphasis of Advent Conspiracy was the redistribution of re-

sources to those without, especially around the issue of clean water, we felt this would be a great opportunity to stay connected to our friends there and to provide tangible life-giving water," Keel said.

Advent, which encompasses the four Sundays before Christmas, is to be the season of spiritual preparation for Christmas. The word *advent*

SEE ADVENT | F12

comes from the Latin word for "coming" or "arrival."

Keel said the congregation will focus on four themes during Advent. Last Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, the focus was on worship.

This Sunday it will be on "resisting the empire," he said, "resisting the consumptive American way of celebrating Christmas."

The third theme is relational giving, giving of oneself instead of just giving gifts.

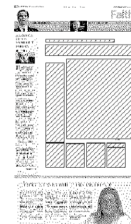
The fourth is redistribution. "The money we didn't spend on buying gifts for ourselves will be redistributed to those with real needs," he said.

On the second and third Sundays, members will get together and make gifts. Families are being encouraged to do this at home.

When Cory Puckett, a member of Jacob's Well, heard Keel explain the Advent Conspiracy, he was a little nervous.

"I thought, 'What are we going to do? Christmas has so many traditions attached to it.' But my second reaction was that I was excited that we would be able to really keep Christmas simple," Puckett said.

"The whole thing becomes



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so complicated and tiring that by the time Christmas is here,

MORE ONLINE

For more on [the Advent Conspiracy](http://www.adventconspiracy.com), go to www.adventconspiracy.com.

you are ready for it to be done. I really like the idea of creating a space in our family and our lives that allows us to anticipate the celebration of Christmas."

Puckett and his wife, Shana, decided they would reduce the amount of money they would spend on clothes and other things, including the number of toys for their three children, ages 8, 5 and 2.

Instead they will spend time making gifts as a family and giving relational gifts. For instance, Shana is going to help her mother paint a room in her mother's home.

The money the family saves will be donated to the church to go to clean-water projects.

"We have told the kids that Christmas will be a little simpler, meaning fewer things," Puckett said. "The 8-year-old was impacted by a video at church about children (in a Third World country) really living in a dump without fresh water until a water project provided fresh water."

Some people may think they

"The whole thing becomes so complicated and tiring that by the time Christmas is here, you are ready for it to be done. I really like the idea of creating a space in our family and our

lives that allows us to anticipate the celebration of Christmas."

CORY PUCKETT

are robbing their children by not giving them as many things for Christmas, but giving a lot of things just trains them to be big consumers, Keel said.

"What we are trying to do is to model for our kids that being a human being is not based on being self-centered.

"We claim to be followers of Jesus, and that means living our lives like him, being self-sacrificing instead of self-centered."

Nancy Haught of Religion News Service contributed to this report.

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Movement conspires against holiday excesses

By Jean Prescott
 McClatchy Newspapers

BILOXI, Miss — In days, Christmas will come crashing down around us. We will eat and drink too much, spend too much and even give in ways that could deplete us.

Feel you're in need of help? Something called the Advent Conspiracy suggests a different, if not altogether new, way to look at and approach giving.

The Rev. Rick McKinley, the pastor of Imago Dei (Image of God) Community in Portland, Ore., realized last Christmas the wretched excess of the holiday as celebrated by one of the wealthiest countries in the world. It exhausts us, it plunges us into debt, and much of what we eat, drink, get and do will be forgotten before spring.

The "movement" aims to worship Jesus and celebrate Christmas through compassion, not consumption.

The Rev. McKinley and his congregation have chosen what might be an unfortunate word — "conspiracy" — to describe what it advocates. Their aim, they say, is to conspire against consumerism and end the practice of giving more to each other than to the person whose birthday it is.

Jeanne McKinley, the Imago Dei pastor's wife, who directs the Advent Conspiracy, told *The (Portland) Oregonian* that the project, barely a year old, now involves nearly 500 churches in 10 countries, and that about 1,700 people have joined online.

In a nutshell, the group advocates assessing our personal approach to Christmas and then committing to changing something about that plan. Imago Dei suggests taking 25 percent of what we would spend on family Christmases and give it to a project they favor, Living

Water International, which provides clean water, medical attention and Christianity to people around the world.

With others to consider in your family circle, you might not be able to change everything or even a few things all at once, but a good place to start is with making gifts instead of shopping till we drop.

No one means to suggest that children, even adults, refrain from buying gifts for loved ones, but that care and kindness replace excessive spending.

Relational giving is part and parcel of the Advent Conspiracy.

Relational gifts engage the beneficiary. Such gifts are best if homemade and are better still if they involve time spent with the recipient.

One recommendation, and there are many at the Advent Conspiracy Web site, is to write down a family story, a bit of family history, and then copy it for family members. You might take the time to think about a friend's favorite music and then create a CD of his or her favorite songs.

Consider the old "coupons" idea, promises to prepare a meal, mow a lawn, give a dance lesson. Print your promises — "Redeem for 1 evening of free baby-sitting" — on index cards, place them in a colorful envelope and know that you've made a Christmas gesture that will keep on giving for however many promises you make.

Another challenge is to find ways to translate this kind of giving into the community at large. Again, suggestions await at the Advent Conspiracy Web site. Bring them up at church or work. Share them with like-minded people. Keep in mind, though, the aim is to adopt the spirit of the movement, not necessarily the specific projects in which Portland advocates are involved.



The Real Meaning of Christmas? *USA Today* Dec. 17, 2007

This holiday is rooted in grand and inspiring purposes that have little to do with culture wars or a red-nosed reindeer — and even less with crass commercialism.

By Tom Krattenmaker

Maybe we're just new-millennium Scrooges, but for many of us, the holiday season has become something to dread. Between the traffic-choked rat race, shopping bacchanalia, and culture wars sniping over the politics of Christmas, what used to be the best time of year has increasingly become just the opposite.

That is why it is so heartening to feel fresh counterwinds blowing in the run-up to Christmas 2007, to see new approaches to the big holiday that promise to bring back the parts that we've seemingly forgotten — especially the peace and hope parts.

(Illustration by Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY)

I am not so naive as to suggest that we've heard the last of the "war on Christmas" rants or some overzealous objections to even the most vaguely religious holiday displays in public settings. Yet, if there's any larger trend to be divined from people such as Marcus Borg and organizations such as the Advent Conspiracy and Christmas for the Needy, there is reason to be optimistic that Christmas might become more fully an occasion for renewal and hope — for religious as well as secular citizens — and ever less a venue for culture war and credit-card debt.

Borg is a Christian theologian and co-author, with John Dominic Crossan, of a new book about the Bible's Christmas stories. In *The First Christmas*, Borg and Crossan re-examine the nativity stories in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke through the lens of historical context, with a particularly close eye on the oppression of Jews by the Roman Empire of Caesar and King Herod. The thrust of the Gospels' Christmas message, Borg and Crossan write, is the possibility heralded by Jesus of a world in which power and violence no longer reign, in which peace and compassion finally prevail.

A focus on 'trivial' issues

As Borg reflected in a recent conversation, "Most of today's culture war over Christmas — whether you say 'happy holidays' or 'Merry Christmas,' whether or not you can have a manger scene in public — is about issues that are trivial compared to what these stories are really about. These stories are about a different kind of world, a world of non-violence, and a world in which the rich and powerful are put down from their thrones and in which the Herods and Caesars are no longer in control."

Some might take issue with Borg and Crossan's message about today's politics: that America has become, in many ways, the Rome of our time and that Christians have done too little to mount prophetic resistance against our government's projection of imperial power.

Yet who could argue with the message the authors draw from the Bible's Christmas stories? Light in the darkest time of the year, hope in a period of creeping despair — these are powerful and universal themes that can give everyone a stake in Christmas, whatever their religious or political proclivities.

So can another idea that is catching on around the country this Christmas season: the realization that it is quite ridiculous that a holy time has succumbed to one of the more unholy aspects of the American character, our rampant consumerism. If "war on Christmas" resisters are truly keen on standing up for Christmas, they have as much to worry about from unrestrained materialism as from the over-the-top secularists who have made it uncomfortable to say "Merry Christmas" to a co-worker.

In a statement as illuminating as it is ironic, none other than Richard Dawkins — Mr. Atheist himself — last year declared Christmas safe for atheists, and for reasons that probably ring true for the most devout Christian believers as well as non-believers.

Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, told *The New York Times* that he of all people celebrates Christmas. "I detest *Jingle Bells*, *White Christmas*, *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* and the obscene spending bonanza that nowadays seems to occupy not just December, but November and much of October, too," he said. Even so, he added, "so divorced has Christmas become from religion that I find no necessity to bother with euphemisms such as, 'Happy holiday season.' "

You could spend all day sorting out the causes of this separation of Christmas from its higher purpose, but few could dispute Dawkins' assessment. British though he is, he is spot-on about Christmas in America when he indicts the "spending bonanza" that has come to characterize the season. Who does not feel the pressure to buy, buy, buy as the calendar moves past Thanksgiving into the gift-purchasing — er, Christmas — season?

Bring on the Advent Conspiracy, a new movement led by idealistic young Christians to confront what it calls the "scandal" of Christmas commercialism.

"Christ," according to the Advent Conspiracy website, "tends to get overlooked at Christmas." This may resonate with Christians who resent crass "Xmas" references in storefront advertisements, but the Advent Conspiracy is not out to plaster "Christ" all over malls. Rather, to remedy the removal of faith from the holiday, conspiracy

organizers are calling on Christians to give fewer material gifts and more of themselves — do-it-yourself photos or poems, for example, experiential gifts such as a special father-and-son outing or donations of time or money.

Judging from its quick growth, the upstart Advent Conspiracy has struck a chord. Launched last year by Rick McKinley, an emerging church leader in Portland, Ore., the conspiracy has attracted more than 700 churches from 17 countries, with thousands of people signing up through its website.

A nod to Jesus

McKinley is asking people to funnel a quarter of the money saved by their non-material Christmas to international clean water projects. As he told *The Oregonian* newspaper, "We celebrate Jesus' birthday by giving ourselves presents. We don't give him anything."

That's a bit of an exaggeration. In truth, innumerable organizations and individuals have been quietly charitable all along. It's just that their good work tends to be overshadowed by the conflict and drama that often grab the media spotlight. New appreciation is owed to organizations such as Christmas for the Needy, which, while not new, have been keeping the better side of Christmas alive.

Christmas for the Needy is a small project run by Veterans Helping Veterans and Others, based in Ohio. Its mission: Feed homeless military veterans, and give food baskets and toys to the children of needy vets. Say what you will about the politics of the Iraq war, it seems beyond debate that homelessness among former service members is a national shame. Kudos to this project and the many like it for making sure that fewer vets are out on the street hungry on Christmas, and that fewer of their children miss out on the joy of a simple Christmas gift.

Maybe it's the darkness of the current historical context that makes these flames of hope stand out so vividly. For Americans, the year ends with an old war dragging on and with mounting dissatisfaction with our national leaders and the direction of our country. With the economy slowing, even retailers have cause for gloom, despite what has been a better-than-anticipated holiday sales season.

Yet there is always hope, and no time like Christmas to reignite it. So let's make it good again.

*Tom Krattenmaker, who lives in Portland, Ore., specializes in religion in public life and is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors.
He is working on a book about Christianity in professional sports.*

A \$200 challenge to give, not buy

Fishers church joins
Advent Conspiracy
urging donations in
the spirit of Christmas

By Robert King

robert.king@indystar.com

FISHERS, Ind. — It would be ridiculous, says the Rev. Daron Earlewine, to show up at someone else's birthday party and make a list of the gifts you want to take home. Just as bad, he said, would be to swap gifts with the other guests while ignoring the birthday boy.

Yet Earlewine says that is exactly what has happened to Christmas.

"This is about compassion, not consumption. This is about spending less, giving more and loving all."

Rev. Daron Earlewine

as a school for the poor, starting a new church Downtown, helping local food banks and building wells in Africa.

"This is about compassion, not

consumption," Earlewine said. "This is about spending less, giving more and loving all."

Members of The Crux, as his church is known, already have responded by pledging more than \$40,000. But Earlewine and Crux worship leader Ryan Brinson are unsatisfied.

They want to rally at least 2,000 other families around Indianapolis to give \$200 for this real-meaning-of-Christmas project they are referring to as the Advent Conspiracy. Begun last year in Oregon, the movement has spread this year to hundreds of churches nationwide and is about nothing less than undermining the consumption-ori-

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ented festival that Christmas has acquired.

With American shoppers expecting to spend, on average, \$859 on gifts this season, according to the American Research Group, leaders of The Crux are urging their members and others to reduce and reallocate.

"The money spent on nonsensical gifts in America could change the world," said Brinson, 29. He says he will spend the week before Christmas living as a homeless person unless people respond to the giving campaign. "We're trying to say drop the nonsense this Christmas."

That passion already has begun to inspire people at The Crux.

They've seen people from their predominantly 20-something church write checks for \$1,000, spouses swear off gift exchanges and members start spreading the word about the Advent Conspiracy to relatives in other states.

"It is about time that we the church — not just The Crux — step outside ourselves and push people to quit talking about what Jesus did and to start doing it," said Crux member Nate Reynolds, 37. He and his wife, Amanda, have diverted part of their Christmas budget to the conspiracy.

Church member Holly Sayer,

29, said the challenge to give differently has prompted her — and the family members she has shared the idea with — to recognize their relative wealth, and the benefits of sharing it in ways other than gift exchanges.

"We don't make a ton of money, but in so many ways we are rich comparatively to the rest of the world," said Sayer, a part-time mental health therapist. Her husband works for the Social Security Administration. "Giving away a little bit of what we have is just right."

The church has set up a Web site, www.adventconspiracyindy.com, to promote the campaign. Donors can give to local projects or global ones. Crux leaders say none of the money will stay with their church.

In many ways the conspiracy is tailor-made for The Crux, a church that evokes a different vibe with its nightclub feel and a pair of leaders in Earlewine and Brinson who have their own Christian rock band. With their patched jeans, wool caps and earrings, they dress the rocker part.

Church member Brian Stump said it is a church for people who are tired of the traditional and interested in something sincere.

"What these two guys have been able to do is vocalize what our generation is really crying out for," said Stump.

Earlewine, 29, said he and his wife plan to forgo gifts to each other while still buying items for their two young sons. The idea, he said, is not a campaign against gifts but a challenge to give first "through the filter of compassion." And he wants people to make "relational" gifts, such as inviting a neighbor over for coffee or having relatives over for dinner.

"Consumerism in the church and in America is just out of control," Earlewine said.

"Christmas is Jesus' birthday," he said. "We should give it back to him."

★ Call Star reporter Robert King at (317) 444-6089.



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VITA

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